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# THE NEW REPUBLIC

*A Weekly Journal of Opinion*

**APRIL 10, 1995**

**FOUNDED 1914**
**WASHINGTON, D.C.**
**ISSUE 4,186**



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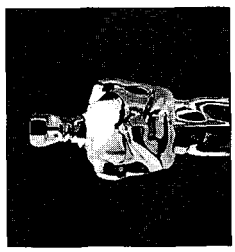

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# CORRESPONDENCE

## Square deal

**To the editors:**

Fred Barnes's analysis ("Revenge of the Squares," March 13) suffers from his uncritical acceptance of Newt Gingrich's concept of "the Great Society counterculture model." Has Barnes forgotten counterculture kids shouting down Hubert Humphrey in the '68 campaign and railing against "the establishment," counterculture theorists like Tom Hayden trashing the liberal welfare state, and LBJ zinging it to counterculture "nervous Nellies" over Vietnam?

If Barnes means that the Republicans are taking back the '60s from the Great Society, they have to give credit to the counterculture whose dogmatism, hubris and cult of the individual they share, albeit with a right-wing tilt.

WILLIAM W. GOETZ
*Oradell, New Jersey*

**To the editors:**

Speaker Newt Gingrich and I never negotiated any arrangement concerning the *Enola Gay* exhibit. I came to the decision to scale it back independently. I then consulted with the Smithsonian's Regents. Days after, I notified the speaker of my decision in the course of a phone conversation about another subject.

I. MICHAEL HEYMAN
*Washington, D.C.*

## More Western studies

**To the editors:**

It would be onerous indeed to sift through the errors in Leon Wieseltier's "All and Nothing at All" (March 7). But shorn of their outlandish rhetorical adornment, these are what I take to be his principal charges. Wieseltier says Cornel West's use of the predicate "prophetic" is an act of vanity. (It is, in fact, a gesture of allegiance and affiliation, as with such predicates as "Christian" or "Kantian.") Wieseltier says that Cornel West is hard to read. (Yet he doesn't distinguish between, on the one hand, those essays addressed to a general audience and written lucidly in the demotic, and, on the other, those addressed to an audience of professional colleagues and written in the professional sociolect.) Wieseltier says that West identifies himself as a Christian but criticizes aspects of Christian practice. (This is of course true of most of the interesting Christian thinkers of our day.) Wieseltier says that West agrees with some aspects of Marxist thought and disagrees with others. (Is that not allowed?) In short, Wieseltier encounters pluralism and sees only incoherence.

Unfortunately, if you're blinkered in that way, you'll miss, as he has, one of the most distinctive and valuable features of West's intellectual enterprise—which is the way it negotiates between apparently opposed values and positions. West has determinedly sought ways of reconciling the language of religion and those of secular social science; holism and historicism; Christian transcendence and philosophical anti-foundationalism. It's this process of rethinking conventional polarities that makes his work so engaging, so challenging and so important. Hence Richard Rorty's observation that if West is anomalous among progressive intellectuals in being patriotic, religious and romantic, well, so much the worst for the rest of us.

A sort of distillate of Wieseltier's disagreement with West can be found in his discussion of the issue of individual responsibility. On this topic, he says West is a "dodger." To clinch the point, he cites West to the effect that immoral behavior is bad, but poverty and misery are bad things, too. What we ought to say, according to Wieseltier, is that poverty and misery are bad things, but immoral behavior is bad, too. You may find it curious to bring so much rhetorical energy to a matter of syntactic emphasis: the merits of "q. but p," over the logically equivalent "p. but q." But it must be admitted that most TNR readers scarcely need to be reminded that immorality is immoral. They may, however, need a refresher about issues of distributive justice. Maybe it *was* wrong for Jean Valjean to have stolen that loaf, but Hugo, you'll forgive him, had another point to make. West is altogether clear that people have moral responsibility for their actions, but neither will he deny the obvious: that things like hopelessness and poverty circumscribe the actions that people take. Remarking upon this doesn't make you a dodger, but a realist.

Wieseltier says that West has "contempt" for the market and black middle class and that he "resents" the new black conservatives. It's a bewildering charge. Contempt and resentment do infuse much debate among black, as among white, intellectuals, but West is an exemplary exception to the rule. He treats the works of those with whom he disagrees with admirable generosity, taking care to note the points on which he things their analyses are correct, as well as those points where he thinks they succumb to error. And he never allows ideological disagreement to tempt him into demonizing his opponents. This is one of the


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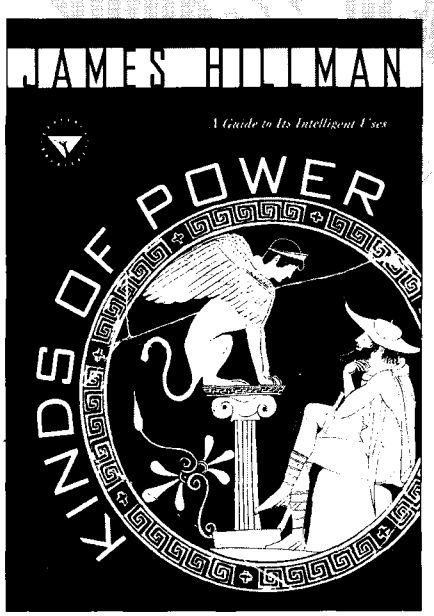


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traits that makes him such an exemplary, indeed preeminent, intellectual figure. In this respect, the author of "All and Nothing at All" might borrow a leaf from his bogeyman.

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

## Snarlin'

**To the editors:**

The Republican Party benefits from Arlen Specter's articulation of philosophical diversity, but your article errs in suggesting that I have endorsed his presidential candidacy ("Darlin' Arlen," Ruth Shalit, March 13). It is my view that Senator Bob Dole makes the most compelling claim for the 1996 nomination.

JAMES A. LEACH
*Member, House of Representatives*
*Washington, D.C.*

## Against the law

**To the editors:**

I don't know whether the Yale Conference on "Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law" went over Jeffrey Rosen's head or whether he mendaciously misreported it for his own reasons (New York Diarist, "Storytelling," March 13).

He puts in the mouth of Elaine Scarry an inane question. Her challenge to me was much more perceptive—as I believe was my answer. Rosen's question, "What percentage of men who murder their wives turn out previously to have abused their wives?"—is as irrelevant in a *murder* trial as the question "What percentage of heroin users previously used marijuana?" in a heroin use trial.

Rosen suggested that I am an advocate of storytelling in the law who occasionally has to "confess" and "concede" that the overuse of narrative may be nothing more than advocacy. Had he paid attention, Rosen would have heard that the entire thrust of my comments was that I am a strong critic of storytelling in the courts.

ALAN M. DERSHOWITZ
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

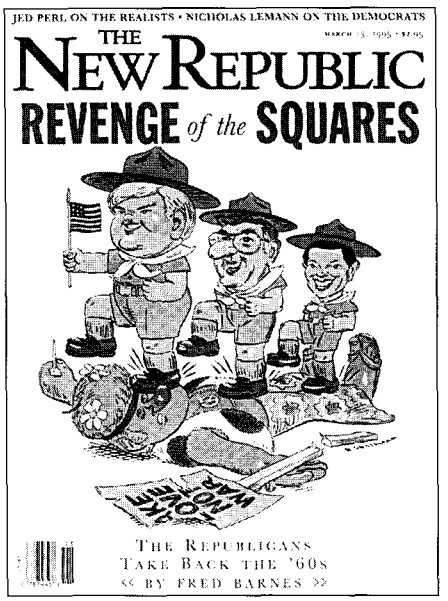
## Frank reply

**To the editors:**

In "Frank Incensed," (March 6) Weston Kosova wrote that I survived the accusation that Steven Gobie was running a gay prostitution ring in the basement below where I lived.

Gobie neither claimed that he was running a gay prostitution ring nor that I was in the same building while I was living there. He charged that he used my apartment when I was not there for heterosexual prostitution. He claimed that he was in charge of several female prostitutes and that I acquiesced in his using my apartment when I was out of town. My response was that I never knew of any such activity, and that I disbelieved that Gobie had engaged in such activity. After investigating, the House Ethics Committee essentially agreed. What I survived was not the fact of prostitution being conducted in my apartment, but an accusation which was essentially disproven that such activity was going on.

BARNEY FRANK
*Member, House of Representatives*
*Washington, D.C.*




## Establishment villain

**To the editors:**

Sara Mosle ("Mrs. Ed," January 23) describes me as the education establishment villain who opposes Teach for America and alternate routes into teaching because they recruit teachers without sending them through education schools. In fact, I have studied a number of alternate route programs that successfully prepare new teachers for urban schools. However, Teach for America is not one of them. The first criticisms of Teach for America's approach to sending new college graduates into poor inner city and rural schools with a few weeks of training came not from the "establishment" but from the recruits themselves.

Four separate evaluations of Teach for America's training (two of them reviewed in my article but ignored by Mosle), found it disorganized, unaware of the knowledge base for teaching and ineffective in preparing people to teach. Mosle claims, incorrectly, that some cities and states have approved this training as sufficient for certification. None have, and officials in the states she mentioned are shocked by this misleading claim. In all cases, additional requirements must be fulfilled for certification, and Teach for America has experimental status only. Several of the states are not sure the program will be continued next year, because the results have been so mixed. Most troubling are recruits sent into elementary schools and special education classrooms who know little about how to teach young children or those with learning difficulties.

My concern is for children and teachers, not for education schools. All children, not just the lucky or wealthy, are entitled to teachers who understand how they learn and how to teach them. All teachers are entitled to learn to teach before they enter classrooms. Teaching cannot be sustained with enthusiasm alone, or done well as a pit stop en route to law school.

LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND
*New York, New York*

## Million-dollar bash

**To the editors:**

Eric Konigsberg reports that John Brockman was able to secure a $1 million advance for the Science Masters Series, published by Basic Books ("Science Made Easy," March 13). Konigsberg called me to confirm information that Brockman had held us up for the stupendous advance of "eight figures" (his words) for the series. I told him the actual purchase price was in fact considerably less than $1 million.

Then Konigsberg asserts that Brockman gets too much for his authors by "tend[ing] to make his pitches to successively younger generations of editors." I am a senior editor with more than twenty-five years in book publishing. Konigsberg's contention that an agent can get junior editors to hand over six-figure advances is laughable. Most *senior* editors can't give out six-figure advances without the publisher's approval.

SUSAN RABINER
*New York, New York*

**To the editors:**

John Brockman represents his clients well—that is, he gets them fat publishing contracts. Some of the clients have trouble delivering publishable manuscripts. Some publishers lose money on the deals. This is Brockman's fault? Aren't authors and editors consenting adults, responsible for their own commitments?

I'm Brockman's client. My advances, alas, have never been in the range that seems to appall Eric Konigsberg.

JOHN CASE
*Cambridge, Massachusetts*



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## FROM WASHINGTON

# Left on base

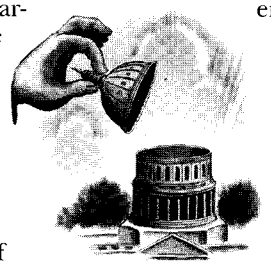
Are there Democrats so loyal they haven't thought, even for a moment, that Bill Clinton's political career is not worth saving? My own moment of doubt came two weeks ago, when the president summoned a group of journalists to the White House to explain his position on welfare reform. Clinton had already ceded the initiative on this issue; now he seemed almost resigned to failure. He admitted that Republican reluctance to spend money on jobs ("they've got some concerns about that") would "limit the practical impact" of any legislation. He said there was "a chance" that the reform "might work" if private employers could be induced to hire recipients, but conceded this idea had failed in the past. What can I say? It was pretty depressing. If Clinton doesn't really care about welfare (an issue, he boasted, that he's "worked on ... for fifteen years") what exactly does he care about these days, except his own re-election?

Sorry. Just a passing thought. Maybe the president was tired at the end of a long day. Yeah, that's it. He was tired. Anyway, suppose his paramount concern *is* simply getting elected president, rather than accomplishing anything in particular. Does that separate him from the others who want the job? Bob Dole? Lamar Alexander? Pete Wilson? Any human being who does what is necessary to become president is likely to be motivated more by general ambition than reformist zeal.

For Democrats, the more intriguing question is this: assuming Clinton's sole goal is remaining president, how might he possibly do it? His awkward response on welfare merely reflects the general awkwardness of his position as a semi-repudiated executive without parliamentary power. Even a pol with no inhibitions about reinventing himself might have difficulty figuring out what to invent. Four not-entirely-compatible alternatives suggest themselves.

1. *Politics 101:* Everyone agrees that, unlike Truman in 1948, Clinton can't win by simply piling up the traditional Democratic voting blocs on the "left" (labor, blacks, etc.). The blocs aren't big enough anymore. What he can do is shore up his "base" among these groups, stop them from supporting a primary challenge and then move to the center next year. This isn't a betrayal of Clinton's "New Democrat" promise, his strategists insist. It's just elementary politics.

So we find Vice President Gore, the great champion of government efficiency, reassuring organized labor that Clinton will protect the notorious Davis-Bacon Act, which hobbles government projects by imposing inflated union pay scales. We find Labor Secretary Robert Reich, champion of participative management, supporting unions in their attempt to make such participation illegal under the Wagner Act. Striker replacements are proscribed by executive order. Veterans programs are protected from even small budget cuts. Paleoliberal welfare activists are stimulated by an indiscriminate defense of the school lunch program. At last, the Mondale presidency!



Unfortunately, Politics 101 requires a precisely choreographed amnesia on the part of the electorate. What if the centrist voters of 1996 remember the paleolib Clinton of 1995? Relatively small gestures can become defining moments (e.g. gays in the military). And the big issues on which Clinton can move to the center—affirmative action, welfare—are coming up this year, not next. Voters already doubt Clinton's consistency. He can't afford to careen from left to right over the next two years.

2. *Rope-a-Dope:* Maybe he can do nothing, or as close to nothing as possible. This is an unpopular idea among Washington commentators, who almost universally call on Clinton to "set priorities," take bold stances, exercise "leadership," etc. But why, exactly? Why not stand back and let the Republicans rip themselves apart for a while? A passive strategy has already worked on the balanced budget amendment. It holds promise for term limits and taxes, where a great lesson will be taught when Republicans have to eat the tax breaks improvidently promised in their Contract with America.

3. *Cohabitation:* Alas, the voters want the Republicans they elected to succeed, not fail. This suggests a refinement of the purely passive strategy, in which Clinton would present himself as a lofty, Mitterrand-like figure—above politics, but ready to step in and stop the Republican Congress's excesses. It's not necessary, in this theory, to convince voters that Clinton has a bold vision, only tha he's a good fellow to have around. Not that the president's interests in a suc cessful cohabitation are inimical t those of Congressional Democrats: Clin ton might be happy to see a GOP Con gress re-elected, as long as he is re elected with them. No wonder Minorit Leader Dick Gephardt is restless.

The problem with presenting Clinto as the mature curber-of-Gingrich-exces is that Dole has already been cast for th role (which Dole can play withou threatening partisan gridlock). Indeed Clinton may not even get an audition "When an incumbent president is i trouble," notes Al From of the Demo cratic Leadership Council, "he run against himself." Unless Clinton some how reignites his old appeal, vo ers are likely to give anybod he runs against the benefi of the doubt. If Ronal Reagan could soften hi image enough to reassur voters in 1980, even Phi Gramm can do the sam in 1996. This suggests final strategy.

4. *Screw the base:* What wa appealing about Bill Clinton i 1992? If you are like me, it wa the idea of a Democrat who coul shake off the interest groups Clinton i now appeasing and grab the reformis center. Clinton was going to lead us int the freewheeling, five-jobs-in-a-lifetim future—even if the AFL-CIO hated i Clinton was going to "end welfare as w know it"—even if Jesse Jackson howlec The obvious issue on which Clinto could dramatically recapture this sort c centrist appeal is affirmative action—b saying the era of racial preferences ha served its purpose and should end.

Base-screwing is a good way to flun Politics 101. The terrifying risk is tha you will lose your old supporters whil failing to attract new ones. I talked to handful of Clinton advisers while prepa ing this column. Virtually all agreed tha Clinton will try each of the first thre strategies, but that he'll never try No. 4 The threat of a primary challenge alon is enough to stop him.

That says something about Clinto the voters already know. But it also sa something about his party. In fact, th more you think about it, the less it Clinton's personality that prevents hi from doing what is necessary to win, an the more it is the structure of the Dem cratic Party itself, especially the ve power of the labor and civil rights esta lishments. Maybe a third party isn't suc a bad idea. Maybe Clinton should sta one.

**MICKEY KAU**



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THE NEW REPUBLIC

APRIL 10, 1995

# NO FREE LUNCH

When the House of Representatives voted on February 23 to scrap the national school-lunch program in favor of block grants to states, liberals let out a howl of outrage. The Children's Defense Fund blitzed the Capitol with faxes denouncing the Republican "threat ... to full and healthy development of our nation's children." Democrats decried the move as an "assault on America's children," in the words of Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy. President Clinton, for his part, stocked up on tacos and canned pears at a Virginia grade-school political stunt. On March 7, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* ran virtually identical front-page stories portraying the bill as a vicious campaign to yank food from the mouths of babes. The *Times* headline: "WHERE A SCHOOL LUNCH IS FOOD, NOT A POLICY ISSUE."

These responses say a lot about today's liberalism—its reflexive piety, sentimentalism and attachment to government—but it says very little about the issue at hand. As it happens, there *are* serious flaws with the Republican school-lunch plan, but they are only obfuscated by the rhetoric.

The debate on whether lunch funds are being cut, and by how much, is not laden with exclusively Democratic blather. The Republicans have self-righteously claimed that they aren't proposing to cut lunch funds, that under their bill, direct cash spending on school lunches actually *increases*—by 4.5 percent every year, to be precise. But this is a phony number. As Robert Greenstein of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has pointed out, the GOP bill doesn't specify funding levels for the school-lunch program—only funding levels for the school nutrition block grant as a whole. Using Congressional Budget Office data, Greenstein puts the rise in funding from fiscal year 1995 to 1996 for programs covered by the block grant at 2.5 percent. Since that's not enough to cover food price inflation and rising school enrollments, the block grant legislation would in fact amount to a cut of $2.3 billion for school food programs. Bad enough, but not the apocalypse the paleoliberals have depicted.

More important, the rhetoric about starving tots has obscured the true question: whether the school lunch program should be block-granted or remain an entitlement. Given the poorly designed structure of the Republican block grant, there's a strong case to be made for preserving the lunch program as a federal entitlement. Like other block grants, this one provides for no adjustments when unemployment in individual states rises. Moving from an entitlement to a block grant means that during slumps, there would be no guaranteed boost for those thrown into need. States and school districts with rising unemployment could be forced, under the worst scenario, to choose between denying meals to newly poor children, reducing portions or carving into other educational services.

With the lunch program, there's another ringer, too. One of the biggest challenges with block grants is devising a formula for distributing federal funds fairly among states. The Republican plan fails this challenge. Currently, states get more money ($1.90 per lunch) for meals they serve free to poor children than they get for the meals purchased by middle- and upper-income children (31.5 cents per lunch); so states get more money if they have more poor kids to feed. The GOP plan, however, would distribute federal funds to states based on the total number of "meals" served in each state—a free full lunch for a poor child counts the same as a low-cost snack sold to a middle-income kid. So if a state wants to get more federal money, what does it do? It serves more meals. And which meals does it serve? Not the full lunches for poor kids, but the cheaper, junky snacks to middle-income children—which will no doubt be even junkier, since the GOP bill would repeal federal nutrition standards for the meals.

Block grants also don't mean an end to bureaucracy. In fact, the Republican bill would increase the proportion of child nutrition funds that could go toward administrative costs. You can see why. Under the new regs, schools would not only have to continue to report on meals and individuals served, different types of assistance provided and other matters; they'd also have to file new reports on additional matters such as whether illegal aliens participated. Sometimes federal programs do work best and can do the job more expeditiously. The mark of the success of the Republican onslaught on government will be whether it can recognize when this is the case and put sanity before ideology. •



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# NOTEBOOK

SIC TRANSIT: Lonnie Davidson, 40, was arrested in Twin Falls, Idaho, for posing in a carpet store window like a mannequin, naked from the waist down.... After the Portland, Oregon, telephone directory misprinted a 1-800 number, callers to an IRS tax information service were greeted with "Hi, sexy," and offered "phone phantasies" for $2.50 to $3.99 per minute.... Carnell Bowmar was sought by Charlotte, Tennessee, authorities after giving shots and prescribing medicine to nursing home residents while posing as a female nurse. Police said he is neither.... Charlie Urie, 31, spent four days lost in an underground storm drain in Phoenix, Arizona, after falling in while cooling his feet near an open manhole.... Two deer mistook their reflections in the cathedral window of Philip Grove's Baton Rouge home for other deer they wished to join, smashed through the glass, destroyed rugs, punctured holes in the walls and did not leave until Grove fended them off with a chair.... Forrest Jones of Martinez, California, was charged with assault with a deadly weapon for failing to tell a sex partner he was HIV-positive.... Community Voice Mail, which provides voice mail for the homeless, announced plans to go state-wide in Idaho next month.... Eight-year-old Michael Moore of New Mexico was declared the winner of the twentieth annual rotten-sneaker contest in Montpelier, Vermont. "Even the dog runs from them," said his mother, Sandrato, on their winning quality.

WE DON'T NEED AFFIRMATIVE ACTION ANYMORE BECAUSE AMERICA IS MATURING TOWARD A COLORBLIND ETHIC.
click.
LET'S TALK ABOUT THE N WORD SOME MORE MR. FUHRMAN...
AND LET ME REPEAT IT — SEVEN TIMES FOR EMPHASIS
TOLES
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GIRL TALK: As a politician, Bill Clinton has always sought out women's votes and sustained a hefty gender advantage against his opponents. The question is, why? Despite his feminist credentials, Clinton is often subtly condescending toward women. Take, for example, the White House ceremony on March 21 to appoint former Iowa Attorney General Bonnie Campbell as head of the Justice Department's new Violence Against Women office. There's no question that the office is a fine addition to the Justice Department. Rape and domestic violence are serious and often neglected problems. But Clinton didn't take them seriously. He cynically played to fear, reciting a litany of inflated rape and domestic violence statistics. The president claimed a violent crime is committed against a woman every twelve seconds; that rape has increased three times faster than other crimes over the past ten years; that there are 700,000 rapes each year. But as David Murray of the Statistical Assessment Service told *The Washington Post*, Clinton's statistics "are fake numbers. They seem to have been overstated and do not accord with ... government numbers or much of the scholarly research on the subject." (The White House has sheepishly retracted the "every twelve seconds" figure.) The statistics are bad enough as they are. Why inflate them, unless you don't think 150,000 annual rapes (the actual number) warrant a response? More condescending still are the White House's gender-exclusive press conferences. First, it was Hillary Rodham Clinton's "off the record" chat with female columnists. This week, another girls-only session, this time between women reporters and women White House staffers. "Ms. Reno, could you please tell us, is the president really as cute and dreamy as he looks on T.V.? And I'd like a follow-up."

HOLLYWOOD SUCK-UP WATCH I: "The electric eye of the video camera outside the Beverly Hills home of Jackie Collins, the Proust of Hollywood, eyed me suspiciously.... Of late, seven of her best-sellers have been published in Russia, making her more popular perhaps, than Tolstoy ... we talked in the library, where among two exquisite Biedermeier desks, various Buddhas and many family photos in silver framers, there is a leather-bound collection of all her original manuscripts. Perhaps they'll be left to Harvard someday. From "The House that Jackie Built," by John Heilpern *Vanity Fair*, April.



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LIFE AND DEATH:

## Man clings to life after fatal blast

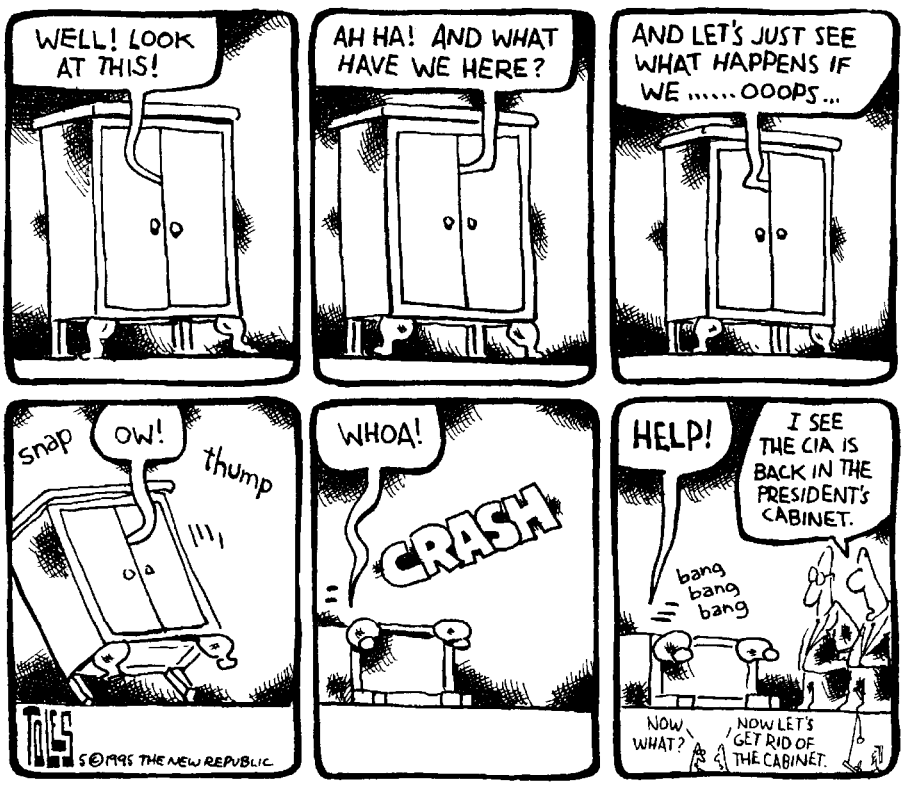
—*Tucson Citizen*, January 10.

## Man Run Over by Freight Train Dies

—*The Los Angeles Times*, March 2.

(Thanks to Kenneth V. Iserson of Tucson, Arizona, and Robert A. Rabkin of Ventura, California.)

AFFIRMATIVE DEAD END: If Bill Clinton thinks he can finesse his way towards a compromise on affirmative action, he should take a look at the mess that Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley has on his hands. Last week, the city's police department announced the results of a recent exam taken by Chicago police sergeants hoping to be promoted to lieutenant. Only a handful of blacks scored among the top 150 to be considered for promotion. For Daley, the white mayor of a 40 percent African American city who next month faces reelection against a black challenger, this was not good news. In the past, big-city mayors resolved the lower scores of blacks on police and fire exams by doctoring the scores to achieve racial balance, a practice known as "race norming." But the 1991 Civil Rights Act banned race norming. This has put the city in a rather awkward position. So the Daleyites are trying a different tactic. They'll promote fifty-four sergeants based on test results (nearly all of whom will be white), plus thirteen more (mostly black) for other factors such as leadership ability." Daley aides say this deal reflects the fact that test results don't capture all the qualities of a good police lieutenant. That's probably true, although it fudges the issue rather than resolving it. Besides, the compromise hasn't satisfied black leaders, who claim the test itself, devised by an outside firm for $5 million, was flawed, though their only evidence is the disparate racial results. "The mayor is playing politics with these promotions," charges mayoral challenger Roland Burris, the former Illinois attorney general. Nor has Daley's compromise satisfied the mostly white police union, which argues the new plan will promote some blacks ahead of higher-scoring whites. The irony is that police work is perhaps the one domain where affirmative action should have its strongest claim: it does make sense to have at least some black police lieutenants running precincts in black neighborhoods. If Daley can't fashion an acceptable compromise on this, what chance does the White House have of saving less defendable race preferences, such as government contract set asides?




HOLLYWOOD SUCKUP WATCH II: "Why are the investors lining up? Because of the team's past. Because of the future it might hold: that DreamWorks will be the prototype plugged-in multimedia company of the new millennium.... It suggests that there is still some Hollywood romance in the youthful determination of three middle-aged men to act like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in the old MGM musicals, shouting, 'Hey guys, let's put the show on right here!'"—Richard Corliss, *Time*, March 27.

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS: Douglas W. Payne's "Wall Street Blues" (March 13) stated that *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Scudder, Stevens and Clark and Soros Fund Management were part of an organization called the Weston Forum. The *Journal* did indeed report this. But it later noted, in a correction, that Scudder was not in fact a part of the forum. And the Soros Management Fund, according to Soros, "declined to participate in the meetings of the Weston Forum organized by the Weston Group." We regret the error. •



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**FREETOWN POSTCARD**

# TEENAGE WASTELAND

*By Joshua Hammer*

Abdullah Kamala, a scrawny 11-year-old wearing a torn T-shirt, shorts and thongs, sat on the porch of a schoolhouse outside Freetown, clutching a box of crayons and an English language textbook. A month ago, Kamala was trudging through the bush of Sierra Leone as an army private, fighting a rebel insurgency with two pistols and a customized AK-47 assault rifle. Now he's in school for the first time in his life, learning to read and write at a rehabilitation center run by Irish priests. "I'm happy now," he told me, speaking Creole English, the lingua franca of this small West African country. "If you in the army, you see lots of atrocities. Here I learn something for my benefits, for my trade."

I met Kamala on a humid afternoon in Sierra Leone's ramshackle capital, where an intensifying guerrilla war has jolted the population, damaged the economy and prompted a mass exodus of expatriates. The conflict has all the ingredients of a classic African nightmare: an ineffectual military government whose control extends barely beyond the capital, a band of insurgents fighting for no apparent reason, a traumatized populace and an entire generation of adolescents trained to be soldiers. The war exploded into an international crisis last January, when rebels attacked titanium and bauxite mines in the southeast and seized nine Europeans. Calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front, the rebels have warned all foreigners remaining in Sierra Leone to leave or risk being taken hostage.

Sierra Leone's guerrillas are part of a frightening new phenomenon in Africa: ragtag insurgencies spreading chaos in the countryside and propelling their countries into economic ruin. These new fighters lack ideology, goals or strategy. They tend to be driven by boredom, greed and the thrill of violence, and they see little to be gained by making peace. Some are spillovers from other rebel movements. Sierra Leone's guerrillas, for example, initially received their arms from one of the half-dozen teenage militias in neighboring Liberia who have slaughtered 150,000 civilians over the past five years. In Uganda, a mystical Christian band calling itself the Lord's Resistance Army, whose young soldiers believe they are impervious to bullets, have been armed by the Sudan government and employed against Sudanese rebels fighting a war of secession in the south. In Zaire, meanwhile, the army has disintegrated into bands of brigands who live off what they can extort from villagers.

Sierra Leone's, though, may be the most mysterious of the new insurgencies. The war started here in March 1991, when a cashiered army photographer named Foday Sankoh and a small band of renegades began attacking government troops in an effort to oust the country's corrupt president, Joseph Momoh. The strategy succeeded: Momoh fled to Guinea after a bloodless coup by young military officers in April 1992. But the war kept going. What's strange is that nobody seems to know why. Sankoh is a shadowy figure who has made no demands of the Sierra Leone government, whose role in the continued fighting is unclear, and who is even rumored to have died of malaria a year and a half ago.

In a drive to wipe out the rebels—at this point probably nothing more than renegade soldiers turned bandits—the regime hastily expanded the army from 3,000 to 10,000 men and boys. But this move has only increased the chaos. Discipline is atrocious among the troops, and many of them desert in the bush. Since the rebels and the army wear identical fatigues and fight with similar AK-47s, it's impossible to tell who is who.

Only a couple of years ago, Sierra Leone seemed on the verge of escaping from the familiar African cycle of poverty, coups and ethnic violence. Now its capital feels like a city under siege. Ten thousand people have died in the conflict, and 1 million refugees from the countryside cram the homes of friends and relatives. The prices of basic commodities, such as rice and cooking oil, have skyrocketed. Newspapers are filled with rumors of imminent attacks on the city. Families of Middle Eastern businessmen, anxious to escape the instability, jam the once-a-week flights to, of all places, Beirut.

On a beach north of Freetown, I met Georgi Vladimirovich, a half-Icelandic, half-Russian man who is full owner of George's Seaside Restaurant. The French holidaymakers who had kept his restaurant going had vanished, and Vladimirovich had been on edge ever since anonymous letters had appeared on Freetown streets that week warning of a rebel attack on the airport. Now, after seventeen years in Sierra Leone, Georgi was thinking about leaving, too. "You see that?" he asked, pointing to a rickety motorboat moored on the beach. "That gets used when the rebels move on the city."

What's most disturbing, in the end, about Sierra Leone's war is that it is kids who make up the majority of the combatants and many of the casualties. On the porch of the rehab center outside Freetown, Abdullah Kamala talked excitedly about his plans now that he had been demobilized. "I want to educate myself," he said. "I'm learning to read and write. I'm gonna be a doctor or a teacher." What would happen if Freetown were attacked? Kamala didn't miss a beat. "I take up my arm again," he said. "I miss the sound of my gun."

JOSHUA HAMMER is *Newsweek*'s Nairobi bureau chief.



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**One woman's managed care hell.**

# H.M.OVERDOSE

*By Casey Thomas*

I didn't want to join a managed care plan. I loved my Blue Cross and Blue Shield plan, but it didn't love my employer and dropped us like a hot potato one year when "not enough" employees had chosen it. So I got stuck in Tufts Associated Health Plan. It was the only one of the choices my employer offered that would let me stay with the two doctors I had seen for years.

I'm not sick, fortunately. I have routine and relatively trivial ailments, and one not-serious chronic problem for which I take a daily pill. I've gradually discovered what all those managed care advocates mean when they say managed care plans are more efficient and cut out unnecessary expenditures. They mean they shift a lot more of their costs onto me and my doctors. They mean I get less care, but that's O.K. because the decrease doesn't show up in their accounting systems. On paper they look great.

For my chronic problem, I get checked out twice a year by a specialist to make sure that nothing's changed and that I'm still tolerating the medication without untoward side effects. But since I was forced into Tufts, neither my specialist nor I can decide whether and when I should have a checkup. Only my internist, the person who Tufts calls my primary care provider but who is also their gatekeeper, can authorize a visit to the specialist. If my specialist visits are to be covered, I have to seek a "referral" from Dr. Gatekeeper. Three years ago that was a nuisance, but still relatively easy. Dr. Gatekeeper handed me a referral form, good for three visits with Dr. Specialist.

But things got more complicated. Tufts said a referral form was good only for three months. I didn't need specialist visits often—only every four or six months. So I started having to procure one of those forms for each visit to the specialist. At first, I could get a form with a phone call to Dr. Gatekeeper's office, but his staff got swamped with all this paperwork and asked me to send a written request with a stamped envelope addressed to the specialist. Or I could come in and pick up the form. The little costs to me of Tufts' cost-saving strategies were starting to add up. I can't begin to calculate the costs to Dr. Gatekeeper as more of his and his staff's time went to referral paperwork.

Then there was the matter of my once-a-day pill. Last year I went abroad for two months and wanted a sixty-day supply of pills to take along. But when my pharmacist tried to fill the prescription and bill it to Tufts, Tufts denied the request, saying they allow only a one-month supply, and will not pay for another refill until twenty-eight days have elapsed. I contacted Tufts, explaining my situation. I got an unhelpful response: sorry, we can't bend our rules, but you can pay for your second-month stock now and file for reimbursement later. More time and money costs to me.

Once I learned of the one-month supply rule, I couldn't help but notice how it creates lots of waste, too. My pharmacist has to take the time to prepare twelve labels in a year, fill twelve bottles and file twelve claims, when she could just as well give me a year's supply, were it not for Tufts' cost-saving rule. She has to use twelve plastic bottles and caps, instead of one large one. I have to make twelve trips to the pharmacy. Does anybody think these costs are counted when the economists and health plans tote up all the savings from efficiency and good management in managed care?

Recently I hurt my knee and needed physical therapy. It was a specialist who examined me and prescribed physical therapy, but in order for my insurance to cover the treatment, I had to have a referral from Dr. Gatekeeper. Since I've rarely managed to procure a referral with fewer than two phone calls to the internist's office, I expected delays. So I went directly from my specialist to Dr. Gatekeeper's office, prescription for physical therapy in hand, to collect the precious referral. A clerk looked at the prescription (three times a week for three weeks, it said), filled out a form and told me she would have Dr. Gatekeeper sign it and would mail it to the physical therapist. By the time of my third physical therapy visit, the referral still hadn't arrived. I called Dr. Gatekeeper's office. The physical therapist's office called. Eventually a referral came, but it authorized only three visits. Meanwhile, the physical therapist, in self-defense born of experience, was having me sign an agreement before she treated me each time, saying I would be financially responsible for the services should my insurance not pay.

It turns out that the maximum number of visits Dr. Gatekeeper can authorize on one referral form is six. I'm way behind. I've already had seven visits, only three of which have been authorized, and I clearly need lots more. So I called Dr. Gatekeeper's office once more to try to secure more referrals for more visits. This time, I was told that they now have a special telephone number for referral requests. I called the number, only to get a lengthy recording, reeling off at least ten items of information I was supposed to leave if I wanted a prescription refill and then another ten or so items of information if I wanted a referral. I furiously scribbled notes, fished for my insurance card in my wallet and left the information. No referral has shown up at the physical therapist's office. I'm still liable for the payment. The bureaucratic snafus are getting deeper and deeper, and I can't talk to a real person in my internist's office anymore.

Meanwhile, Dr. Gatekeeper is paying the cost of an additional telephone line and perhaps an additional



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person to staff it. All his patients are paying the additional time cost of having to listen to a long recording and probably having to make a second phone call because they can't remember all the details they are supposed to provide. The physical therapist is out money because she can't get reimbursed until my referral forms show up. I may be out of money, if Dr. Gatekeeper's staff doesn't understand my recorded message or forgets to backdate the referral forms to cover the visits I've already had.

One day, while she was pushing and poking at my knee, the therapist explained to me how insurance has kept her payments so low that she has had to cut back each treatment session from an hour to forty-five minutes. In effect, while Tufts and other managed care plans are bragging about how they are providing more care for less money, their members are getting less care for more money and more lost time.

What's happening in the United States is a massive substitution of paperwork for medical treatment and a massive shifting of the new costs of paperwork and monitoring onto patients and medical personnel. Since these are not highly visible cutbacks, like insurer refusals to pay for expensive cancer treatments or transplant operations, our politicians and policymakers aren't even noticing. While the managed care plans and other insurers tell us how private enterprise and the competitive spirit are preserving the world's greatest health system and keeping us safe from bureaucracy, we patients are getting taken to the cleaners.

CASEY THOMAS is a pseudonym adopted to protect the providers in this story who have bent the rules for their patients' benefit.

## ON THE HILL

# THE COALITION

*By Fred Barnes*

On March 10, twenty conservative Democrats from the House of Representatives took a bus from the Capitol to the White House, where President Clinton had invited them to lunch. Known collectively as "The Coalition," they're the bane of Minority Leader Dick Gephardt's existence, since they not only vote for Republican bills but often cosponsor them. That didn't faze Clinton. Whatever they said, he agreed with. Their work with Republicans to curb class-action lawsuits in securities cases? Consumer groups and the lawyers' lobby were fervently opposed, but Clinton congratulated them. Their effort to limit unfunded mandates by Congress, a measure Democratic leaders blocked but GOP leaders brought to the House floor? Great job, Clinton said. Affirmative action? The president said he needs their help on that. He pulled Representative Gary Condit of California aside and made a special plea for aid in resolving the affirmative action debate. It was only when one of the guests mentioned a bill on property rights the group had helped clear the House that Clinton remained silent. The bill's chief foe, Vice President Albert Gore, was in the room, fidgeting.

Clinton was wasting his breath. He doesn't figure in the plans of the conservative Democrats, except as the national politician they most want to distinguish themselves from. For them, it makes sense politically and ideologically to act as renegades against Clinton and their own party. Many represent conservative, Republican-leaning districts. In Congress, as Representative Billy Tauzin of Louisiana puts it, they are "a minority within a minority but part of a philosophical majority." They're more in tune with conservative Republicans who control the House than liberal Democrats who used to. And they're more pivotal to what Republicans want to achieve than to what Democrats are plotting. GOP leaders are eager to pile up large bipartisan majorities for the Contract with America. By courting conservative Democrats, they have. The coalition hasn't been crucial yet; Republicans can win with them or without. But on the true test of House Speaker Newt Gingrich's regime—cutting spending deeply—they may provide the margin of victory.

Conservative Democrats haven't had so much clout since 1981, when boll weevils in the House like Phil Gramm (then a Democrat) and Kent Hance helped President Reagan win passage of his tax and spending cuts. Now there are fewer of them—the coalition has only twenty-three members—but their influence may be greater. Republican leaders are willing to moderate bills to make them more appealing to the coalition. On the securities bill, for example, they accepted Tauzin's changes that softened the loser-pays requirement and defined what constitutes recklessness. The measure became less far-reaching, but it passed the House 325 to 99. That margin makes a Clinton veto less likely.

It was the 1994 election that turned conservative Democrats into an active, deal-making force. The Republican sweep both terrified them and vindicated their view that the problem with Democrats is Clinton and the party's excessive liberalism. Tauzin, among others, came "within a hair's breadth" of switching parties. He and his allies found existing groups too passive. The Conservative Democratic Forum promoted little more than "moaning and groaning," complained Mike Parker of Mississippi. As for the Mainstream Forum, mostly moderates, it "got obliterated on November 8," said Tauzin. "The center of the party just got put out of existence." Condit and Pete Geren of Texas had at one time half-seriously talked about a "NLT" caucus for conservative Democrats "not on the leadership track." Both



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elected in 1989, Geren replaced ousted House Speaker Jim Wright and Condit won House Whip Tony Coelho's seat when Coelho resigned. Those two "are as different as anybody can be from their predecessors," said Colin Peterson of Minnesota, another coalition member. Peterson's presence is telling: the coalition is not just made up of Southern Democrats. It includes Bill Orton of Utah, David Minge of Minnesota, Condit and other non-boll weevils.

The group has two requirements and a clear strategy. To join, a House Democrat must have a conservative or moderate voting record. "And you've got to have a bad attitude," said Peterson. Which means a bad attitude in the opinion of Democratic leaders. "If you ever get appointed [by Democrats] to an important committee, you're thrown out," Peterson added. He's in the awkward position of being a regional whip in the Democratic leadership, a post he got before the coalition came along. Not surprisingly, he's been getting the cold shoulder at whip meetings lately. The coalition gets together regularly with Gephardt, but relations are frayed. "I get along with Gephardt," said Parker, "but I doubt very seriously if I'll be a pallbearer at his funeral." The group's weekly sessions with House Republican Whip Tom DeLay are more productive. "Our purpose is to try to push legislation to the center and be a moderating influence on both caucuses," said Peterson. The Republicans, Parker insisted, "have treated us better than the Democrats."

Jimmy Hayes of Louisiana said as much on the House floor on February 23 when the moratorium on new regulations was under debate. "I would simply make this observation as a Democrat who has been here for eight years," he said. "The first chair of the committee that has allowed me to offer an amendment to change language has been this Republican chair." (Hayes's amendment exempted the declaration of hunting, fishing and camping seasons from the moratorium.) On unfunded mandates, Republicans used Condit's bill, one Democrats had never allowed Condit to bring to the House floor. And when Cardiss Collins of Illinois, the ranking Democrat on the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, refused to appoint Condit to the House-Senate conference on the issue in March, chairman Bill Clinger of Pennsylvania gave him a GOP seat.

Cooperation between Republicans and conservative Democrats has been both macro and micro. Gingrich accepted the coalition's version of the balanced budget amendment and Tauzin's refinements of legislation protecting property rights against regulatory encroachment. At the subcommittee level, Peterson got together with Republican freshman David McIntosh of Indiana on the regulatory moratorium. Peterson sought a compromise between McIntosh and the White House. He exempted "routine" regulations, streamlined the process of waiving the moratorium, and barred judicial review. "We made it workable for the administration," said Peterson. "Yet they still opposed it." McIntosh didn't. "When we come up with a very hard issue, [conservative Democrats] can make the difference whether we go forward," McIntosh said. The moratorium passed the House 276 to 146.

Members of the coalition believe they'll be more important to the GOP once the Contract with America, with its near-unanimous support among Republicans, is exhausted this spring. They're right. To get a majority on many issues, Republicans will have to accommodate either their own moderates or the coalition. This hasn't always worked. Conservative Democrats declined to back an amendment allowing states to bar Medicaid abortions for rape and incest. So GOP leaders had to accede to moderates and drop the amendment. Nor would the coalition support the large tax cut that Republican leaders favor but moderates don't. Now comes the issue of the decade, the budget. Republican moderates are queasy about deep spending cuts, conservative Democrats less so. "They can't cut deep enough for me," said Parker. Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston is blunt: "We need the conservative Democrats." This time, they're pivotal. •

**Cranks, fetishists and monomaniacs.**

# FLAMERS

*By Gary Chapman*

A joke floating around the Internet:
Q: How many Internet contributors does it take to change a lightbulb?
A: What are you trying to say, you worthless, scumbag jerk?

Computer networks are increasingly hyped as a new medium of virtuous democratic and social discourse, the cyber-version of the Acropolis. A *Time* magazine reviewer recently called the Internet "the ultimate salon" of conversation, and *The Utne Reader* is promoting "electronic salons" to soothe the anomie and coarseness of contemporary life. Author Howard Rheingold has celebrated the "virtual community" as a source of solace and fraternity, and columnist David Broder has written paeans to the new spirit of civic participation allegedly found on computer networks.

Electronic conversations—if that's what they are to be called—on the Internet and various other computer networks such as America Online, Prodigy and CompuServe, are certainly a new and interesting feature of American social life and manners. The terabytes of gab on these systems, engaging millions of people, are perhaps the first display of the direct voice of the American people in an ongoing, semi-organized, public forum.



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People are talking about everything under the sun—politics, pet care, even deliberate gibberish. Consequently, politicians, pollsters, reporters, marketers and social analysts are keenly interested in what our fellow citizens are thinking and saying on-line. Electronic conversations, to our benefit, allow people to circumvent the managed public dialogue that politicians and P.R.-types try to shape to serve their own ends.

But the evidence of public virtue in cyberspace is so far more discouraging and alarming than noble and salutary. Electronic salons already contain broken furniture and have mud on their walls. The notorious phenomenon of "flaming"—issuing a nasty and often profane diatribe—is now a familiar sociological curiosity. UseNet news groups—open, topical conversations accessible over the Internet and other systems—have become vast libraries of pyrotechnic insults. Mark Dery, editor of a new book, *Flame Wars*, offers a few choice examples: "You syphilitic bovine harpy." "You heaving purulent mammoth." "You twitching gelatinous yolk of rancid smegma." You get the idea. Many retorts are merely terse, obscene snarls, but Internet users have also developed a competition in rococo, smart-alecky taunts, such as this one: "Your reply was most impressive. You seem to have the ability to respond to mail with either profanity, inanity or pointless threats of physical violence. Why don't you try those pills the doctor gave you, and take a nice long rest. It may do you no good, but I am sure the remainder of the viewers would be pleased by the absence of your moronic and asinine diatribes." It's hard to imagine such exchanges at a PTA meeting or a cocktail party. Electronic communication is providing a disturbing glimpse of what may be smoldering, heretofore unsaid, in the minds of many Americans.

More generally, electronic conversations appear to be prone to misinterpretation, sudden and rapidly escalating hostility between the participants, and a weird kind of implosion when the conversants express their anger with sulking silence. This may be because, unlike in face-to-face conversation, there are no visual cues, what linguist Peter Farb calls "paralanguage." It may also be because people who are completely removed from one another physically can assault each other verbally without fear of bodily harm, a suggestion that our evolutionary heritage is still at work in restraining our behavior in everyday encounters.

Electronic anonymity also encourages fantasy life, often tilting toward the dark side. Dedicated network denizens frequently inhabit alter egos attached to their computer names. Some computer users have identities in cyberspace that correspond to exotic names, such as Phreak or Acid, two well-known hacker monikers, rather than to their prosaically named real-world personae. While a middle-class, suburban white man may tend not to adopt a *nom d'ordinateur*, millions of electronic Walter Mittys nationwide do take on a more aggressive personality behind a computer and a modem—ferociously pouring out their otherwise sublimated middle-class angst.

A cyberspace alter ego often goes beyond a new name and a release of inhibition. Network users lie, sometimes spectacularly. Pavel Curtis, a Xerox researcher who runs a fascinating Multi-User Dimension (or MUD)—a kind of a "virtual world" within the Internet with its own simulated geography, characters and interactions—reports that a significant portion of people logging into his system switch genders for the identities they assume. Most common are young men who portray themselves as women; indeed, it's become a rule of thumb that any sexually aggressive female on this MUD is really a man. Peter Lewis, *The New York Times*'s cyberspace reporter, tells a story about a man who conducted a protracted and intimate electronic romance over the Internet with a pen pal, who said she was a 26-year-old graduate student. When he met her in person, he learned that she was in fact a 13-year-old girl.

As the French discovered in their national Minitel system, sex often dominates electronic encounters. The majority of messages on Minitel have been advertisements for sex or sex talk, and, national character notwithstanding, Americans are no slackers in this regard. Computer communication seems to bring out the id screaming for attention. In February, a University of Michigan student, Jake Baker, was arrested for posting to the university's computer network a graphic fantasy of the rape, torture and murder of a fellow student; though such stories are common on a few news groups, Baker actually named his victim, which police interpreted as a threat. A reporter for *Computer Life* magazine posed on the Internet as a 15-year-old cheerleader and got more than thirty e-mail messages of a sexual nature, including requests for her panties and her telephone number. Harassment of women is so common that women often pretend to be men to avoid sexually suggestive e-mail.

Bigotry and misogyny are prevalent as well. As Amy Harmon noted recently in *The Los Angeles Times*, bigots are showing up on computer networks with increasing frequency because they can't get a hearing anywhere else. Networks are a cheap means for white supremacists and neo-Nazis to get their hate messages to thousands of people at once. The Simon Wiesenthal Center has protested to Prodigy about frequent anti-Semitic rants on that system. Prodigy officials are caught, to their embarrassment, in a tug-of-war between freedom of speech and the basic civilities that many users expect.

Finally, the general quality of the rhetoric on the Internet is discouraging in itself. Even without all the cranks, poseurs, charlatans, fetishists, single-issue monomaniacs, sex-starved lonely hearts, mischievous teenagers, sexists, racists and right-wing haranguers many participants in unstructured Internet conversations have little of interest to say but a lot of room in which to say it. Goofy opinions and comical disregard for facts are rampant. Spelling is haphazard and even simple typos sometimes produce absurd flaming fire fights. Nearly every reasonable discussion is sooner or later discovered by someone with a hobby horse or an abrasive personality or both, and there are few reliabl



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ways to shunt such people elsewhere. It's pretty clear, too, that quite a few messages come from people who must be drunk; there are as yet no sobriety checkpoints on the "information superhighway." The new electronic Acropolis seems to foster rhetoric stylistically closer to Beavis and Butthead than to Pericles.

Fifteen years ago, the forerunner of the Internet, the Arpanet, was used almost exclusively by top computer scientists and other elite engineers and scientists, who tend to be a refined bunch, partial to classical music and good books. Many are now appalled by what networking has become. Some have dropped off the net altogether.

This suggests that the Internet may be on a path similar to that followed by television and other communications media: the introduction of the masses so alienates well-educated, cosmopolitan people that they abandon the medium or resort to a specialized class of cultural material that advertises its disdain for mass tastes. There are already signs that this is happening on the Internet: while veterans of the net have tended to narrow their presence to a select group of exclusive and low-profile mailing lists, more recent users are complaining loudly about the influx of hundreds of thousands of newcomers via America Online, "newbies" who are stumbling around the net asking greenhorn questions and committing faux pas of "netiquette." Many people with pressing schedules are starting to regard the cacophonous noise as a waste of time. Their exits raise the proportion of nuts, creeps and boors. Thus an inevitable backlash against the lofty hype surrounding the Internet is building, such as in Cliff Stoll's new book, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway.*

This all sounds like an anti-democratic trend, in contrast to the democratization that computer networks are supposed to both exemplify and support. Is cyberspace already sorting itself into two camps, a jaded, invisible elite and a teeming mass of wrassling rubes? This image wouldn't be unusual in the history of American popular culture. It seems clear that cultural polarization and low behavior in cyberspace reflect trends in American society as a whole, but the peculiar features of computer communication are amplifying the decline of our national mores and manners, and, at the same time, giving us an unprecedented bird's-eye view of what we've become.

Of course, we can always hope that computer networks are undergoing a metamorphosis from childhood to adolescence these days, with an anticipated maturation into adulthood sometime in the future. We'll have to develop manners in cyberspace just as we have in our everyday, real-world encounters, and that could entail a long process of evolution and refinement. If we don't develop virtual manners, cyberspace will continue to resemble a mud wrestling event. But if we can treat each other with respect over e-mail, we may go a long way toward solving some of the basic dilemmas of democracy.

GARY CHAPMAN is director of The 21st Century Project at the University of Texas in Austin.

**Meet Fred Thompson (R-Hollywood).**

# REAGAN REDUX

*By Ruth Shalit*

"Ah ... am ... *irritated*!" It's only minutes after the balanced budget amendment to the Constitution went down to defeat in the Senate. Fred Thompson, the freshman Republican from Tennessee, has staggered back into his Dirksen office, looking pale and undone. His combed-back gray mane seems to have whitened, and there are dusky circles under his eyes. "There is another word Ah choose not to use," he says slowly. "Let's just say, irritated." Thompson has good reason to be irritated. The trouncing of the balanced budget amendment in the Senate is the Republican Congress's most shaming defeat thus far, and as assistant floor leader for pushing through the measure, the jowly actor-turned-senator is not without his share of responsibility. But even in defeat, Thompson is the picture of homespun good will. "Ah don't understand it," he drawls, heaving his hulking 6'6" frame into a worn chair. "Ah really don't. Ah feel kinda like those civil rights advocates musta felt like sometimes. They just didn't understand the other sahde."

Thompson leans forward, genuine anguish knitting his regular-guy features. "Cain't they see our inability to deal with the problem? Cain't they see—that this is going to *destroy* us?" He shakes his head. "Where does this leave us?" he asks the air. "Business as usual. Ah just don't understand it."

Two floors above us, in the Rayburn Room of the Capitol Building, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole is giving reporters his spin on the defeat of the amendment. His set-piece answers are in striking contrast to Thompson's polished folksiness. "We lost, but we won," he rasps. "The Democrats have just handed us a gigantic political opportunity." Yes, but what about the country? Thompson, a veteran character actor, may not care any more than Dole does, but unlike some of his brethren, he recognizes the value of theater in politics. "Ah just know how to do that stuff," he admits in his syrupy Tennessee twang. "Ah can speak to a camera just like Ah can speak to you." Reflecting on the fate of the balanced budget amendment, he shuns Dole's meta-political calculation. "Ah think they've given the Republicans a serious political issue," he says. "But Ah think the country is the worse for it." Like Reagan, he has turned his job into a role.

Thompson's impact on Washington at the height of



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Republican triumphalism is an interesting phenomenon, because Thompson is a grim reminder of what the Republicans still don't have. They don't have a Reagan, someone whose blend of politics and entertainment can eclipse the ideological fault-lines in the Republican Party. He has succeeded modestly as an actor and senator precisely because the role he has repeatedly chosen to play is not especially demanding—for him or for us. He's the closest thing the country now has to Reagan redux.

Like Ronald Reagan, Thompson eked out a career as a B-movie actor, playing wholesome authority figures who are slow to anger, but willing to fight for the right. In his eighteen feature films, he has played a White House chief of staff, a CIA director, a highly placed FBI agent and a rear admiral. In John Hughes's *Baby's Day Out*, he played Dale Grisham, the glowering FBI man assigned to hunt down the Cotwells' missing tot. "Radio Rogers and McCluskey," he boomed into his walkie-talkie. "Tell 'em to turn around. We're going back to the tick-tock to get the boo-boo. And send for backup."

According to Thompson, the relationship he formed with voters during his campaign was merely an extension of the bond he had forged with movie audiences. "When I acted," he says, "I was only playing myself." In Washington, as in Hollywood, Thompson believes in his role as a citizen-hero. At times, he does not appear to be acting at all. An earnest, affable man with a flair for simplification, he knows how to make a speech and deliver a punchline. He taps into populism and spins it with Reaganite slickness, proudly referring to his fellow members of Congress as "them" or "those characters." On the current Republican hot-button topics, he evinces just the right degree of political honesty. He's pro-choice and is one of the few Republicans willing to broach the subject of cuts in Social Security. But he swaddles his words in soothing balm about not wanting to hurt the "old folks." Not bad for a beginner. Good enough, even, to make him a distant but conceivable vice presidential pick in 1996.

Fred Dalton Thompson, who is divorced, is one of only fourteen single men in the U.S. Senate; and his wifelessness is suggested by the indifferent decor of his office. By this time, most freshman lawmakers have already spruced up their salons with oriental rugs, crystal chandeliers and resplendent color photographs of adoring children. Right next door to Thompson, fellow Tennessean Bill Frist and his wife, Karyn, have swathed their spacious parlor in soft folds of forest-green moiré. But Thompson, guided by no bustling helpmate, has furbished his office as a bland beige bachelor pad, brightened only by red chintz curtains and a few pasty watercolors on the walls. As he speaks, he sits not on a plush velvet armchair, but on threadbare office furniture that seems to have been wheeled in from somewhere. In the background, distressingly, the stereo plays selections from a C.D. called *Peaceful Waters*, a compendium of new-age trills.

At age 52, Thompson doesn't need a fashionable office to burnish his mystique. A tall, craggy man of commanding bearing, he wears his designer suits with scuffed cowboy boots and dates pretty country singer Lorrie Morgan. Despite the down-home sensibility of his political pitch, he is impressively self-aware. After our interview is over, he discovers he is twenty minutes late for a briefing session with Henry Kissinger. So he grabs his briefcase and billfold and heads over to the Capitol Building, a gaggle of aides in tow. As we approach the Senate subway, we notice that the car is about to pull away from the station. Thompson's staffers break into a mad dash. "Hurry!" they scream. The senator does not break his long stride. "We'll get the next one," he says smoothly, and we do. It's a small detail, but oddly telling. For all his folksiness, Thompson realizes that a mad sprint for the subway car will make him look foolish, and he doesn't want to do it.

Thompson's first bout of fame in the Senate came in December, when Dole tapped him to reply to President Clinton's televised speech on tax cuts. Thompson spoke for four minutes, a fraction of the time used by Clinton. It was a smashing performance. Perched comfortably against the edge of a desk, Thompson described Clinton's proposed tax cut as a desperate attempt to follow the lead of Republicans. He played to voters' hatred of Washington, promising changes from "those of us who just came to town." Never mind that for the past twenty years, Thompson had worked as a big-money lawyer-lobbyist, keeping an apartment just eight blocks from the White House. "I'm still unpackin' my boxes," he said. The media was agog with admiration. "A STAR IS BORN," declared *The New York Times*.

Since then, Thompson's luster seems to have faded a bit. The blackout, staffers say, is deliberate. "Right after the speech, he pared back his national media," says a Thompson staffer. "He didn't want to get overexposed." That hasn't foreclosed talk of a presidential run in 2000, or even in 1996. "It's a little complicated for Fred, because of Lamar," explains Republican consultant Tom Ingram, a close Thompson's adviser. "For Fred to be competitive with Lamar would be awkward for both of them. But if it becomes clear early on that Lamar is going to be unsuccessful—well, I think Fred becomes someone that people would look to." Surveying the Republican field it's easy to see why. "Fred brings excitement," raves Ingram. "He brings electricity. He brings freshness and moderation. Unless you're looking for race or gender he brings everything you could possibly want to the ticket." Others agree. "Reagan was elected governor in '66 and ran in '68, after a successful career as a movie actor," argues Bill Kristol of the Project for a Republican Future. "Thompson should follow in his footsteps."

The Reagan parallel is indeed uncanny. A poor boy



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of humble origins with a knack for charming people works his way though an obscure college (Reagan went to Eureka, Thompson to Memphis State). Both Reagan and Thompson launched their political careers in their mid-'50s, when they were already minor celebrities. Both had an enduring populist streak. During his campaign, Thompson crafted an image of homespun American virtue fighting the villainous special interests that rule the nation's capital ("If you folks are satisfied with the way things are in Washington," he told crowds on the campaign trail, "I'm probably not your boy.") Like Reagan, he turned his lack of legislative experience into an asset, arguing that the Beltway elite had mucked things up so badly that they could no longer be trusted to run the government.

FRED THOMPSON BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Today, Thompson continues to invest much of his energy and interest in his public performances. "Making a good five-minute television speech has nothing to do with brains," he says. "It's a function of genetics and Hollywood. But it's important to do it well. This is something that I do well." But whereas Reagan relied on 3" x 5" cards to discuss the most mundane of issues, Thompson prefers to script himself. "He writes all his own speeches," says Dole's deputy campaign manager Bill Lacy, who managed Thompson's Senate campaign. "He preps himself. During the campaign, we tried to stage a few mock debates, where we would tell him what Jim Cooper was likely to say. He wasn't interested. He packed up his stuff and went to his law office and started preparing himself." Whereas Reagan's handlers despaired of ever engaging him in a substantive discussion of issues, Thompson revels in his technical grasp of policy minutiae. "I can remember the first time we met with him after the election," says Paul Jacob of U.S. Term Limits, a private political organization. "We were skeptical. Was this someone who really understood and believed in the issue? Or was he just an actor? Well, he came over to our offices. He took his jacket off. He didn't have an entourage. It was just him. We talked for forty-five minutes. The depth of his understanding was incredibly impressive."

Though born in Sheffield, Alabama, Thompson was raised in Lawrenceburg, a miniscule town just over the Tennessee border. Thompson's blue-collar roots are authentic. His father, Fletcher, sold used cars for a living (although he wasn't just any used-car dealer; as Thompson's bio notes, he was "a used-car dealer respected throughout the county for his unwavering honesty"). Thompson himself worked his way through college and law school by selling shoes, driving trucks and working at a factory. He achieved notoriety at age 30, when Howard Baker plucked him out of private practice in Nashville to serve as Republican counsel for the Senate Watergate Committee. It was Thompson who grilled Alexander Butterfield, the Nixon staffer who eventually admitted that his boss had bugged the Oval Office. "Mr. Butterfield," Thompson had famously thundered, "are you aware of the installation of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the president?" But it was a case in Tennessee four years later that clinched Thompson's persona as a hero of the citizenry. Back in Nashville practicing law, he represented a woman, Marie Ragghianti, who had been fired from the state's pardons and parole board after she blew the whistle on corruption in the prison system. Thompson not only won the high-profile case, he uncovered a huge clemency-for-cash scandal that eventually put Governor Ray Blanton in jail. When Hollywood decided to turn the story into a movie, *Marie*, staring Sissy Spacek, Thompson was asked to play himself. He has been working in movies ever since, even as he continued his practice as a big-dollar Washington lawyer and dealmaker.

Facing a tough race against then-Representative Jim Cooper, Thompson's fledging Senate campaign



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started out, not unreasonably, by stressing his impressive résumé as the personification of power in Hollywood and Washington. As his early campaign literature suggested, Thompson didn't need high office to impart a sense of self-esteem. "Fred Thompson is ready to put his law practice aside," soothed one brochure. "To turn down all movie offers. And to apply his experience and understanding of inner workings of power to the nation's most severe problems." Thompson, a shrewd lawyer, was uncontrite about his experience and abilities; but in a year of rebellion against the dreaded Washington, his corridors-of-power message didn't fly. At the end of 1993, the candidate held a "prayer meeting" with Howard Baker and Lamar Alexander to discuss the sorry state of his campaign, during which it was prayerfully concluded that the campaign manager should be fired. Thompson fired the staffer, but his campaign continued to founder.

Then, one day in early 1994, it all came together at a Cracker Barrel restaurant in Cookeville, Tennessee. "There we were, just Fred and me," recalls Tom Ingram. "He was pretty miserable about the way it had all been going. I said, 'Fred, if you were running the campaign what would you do?' He said, 'I'd get in my blue jeans and a pickup truck and drive from one end of the state to another. But everyone I've mentioned it to says it's crazy.' I said, 'Fred, I don't think it's crazy at all, if it's what makes you comfortable.'" Campaign manager Lacy was the biggest naysayer. "Fred approached me about the notion of the pickup truck," he says. "I said, 'Fred, I wouldn't do that. I don't think it conveys the right image for you. It would be gimmicky and hokey and it wouldn't work.'" Hearing this account today, Thompson chuckles. "Well," he says slowly, "two outta three ain't bad."

As Thompson suggests, the gimmick worked. In August 1994 Fred Thompson pulled on his Wranglers and cowboy boots and climbed behind the wheel of a rented, red 1990 Chevy pickup truck to traverse Tennessee's highways. He began to deliver speeches from the back of it, referring to the vehicle as "this ol' baby" or "that rascal." Calling himself "Ol' Fred," he began to assail his Rhodes Scholar opponent as an effete elitist "who's never seen the inside of a pickup truck." Tennesseans were delighted, and Thompson's numbers immediately took off.

Of all the anti-Washington campaigns in 1994, Thompson was most zealous in his distaste for the Beltway elite. An enthusiastic advocate of term limits, Thompson pledged to step down after two full terms. "They have no idea, do they," he mused in a campaign ad called "Put on Us." "The career politicians. How the laws and taxes they put on us affect us. So let's stop Congress from exempting themselves from the laws they make for the rest of us. Let's take away their million-dollar pensions and pay raises. Let's take our government back." On November 8, Thompson defeated Cooper with 62 percent of the vote.

Basking in the afterglow of his huge victory margin, Thompson drove his red pickup truck right up to the steps of the Capitol, hoping to cause "the doggonedest traffic jam that Washington, D.C., has ever seen from all those staff members trying to get out of town." But then came the difficult task of converting months of campaign rhetoric into action. And indeed, Thompson found it hard to leave behind entirely the blandishments of business-as-usual. In late February, he angered his reform-minded colleagues by shoehorning into the balanced budget amendment a special provision protecting the Tennessee Valley Authority. "If the TVA had been the DVA, in Delaware, he wouldn't have supported it," grumbles Republican Senator Jim Inhofe today. Shortly after his response to Clinton, he began skipping the freshman senators' weekly morning meetings, prompting speculation that he had gotten too big for his britches. "People have read into his lack of attendance a certain arrogance," says one freshman senator. "There is some grousing and some bitterness."

In other areas, however, he has been genuinely refreshing. A pro-choicer, he is one of few Republicans to refrain from demagoguing on the subject of surgeon general nominee Henry Foster. "Ah would be very, very reluctant to interfere in his doctor-patient relationship and pass judgment on mutual decisions that adult people make under those circumstances," he explains. "Ah don't do that. Ah don't feel Ah have the right to do that as a private individual. And being a senator don't make me a damn bit smarter."

On term limits, he has distinguished himself as one of the Republicans to support the measure unequivocally, even after the election. During meetings of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he was able to coax longtime term-limits opponent Orrin Hatch of Utah into agreeing to vote the issue out of the Judiciary Committee, where it had long languished. "Before Thompson, we could never even get it brought up in committee," says Senator Hank Brown of Colorado. "Now people have gone along with it who weren't even in favor." Thompson, Brown adds, has been able to sway members by the sheer force of his personality. "There is a magnetism that surrounds him. He is a very commanding personality.... And so he has been able to accomplish things that others have not been able to accomplish."

For all his revolutionary zeal, there's one issue Thompson has been curiously silent on since arriving in Washington. During his campaign, he spoke eloquently about the need to winnow congressional pensions and pay. Not anymore. Asked about it today, Thompson alludes vaguely to a possible "citizen-Congress" bill he may introduce in the months to come. But Thompson's aides tell a different story. "We've found that [the pay cut] is just not a proposal that has a lot of support up here," says one Thompson adviser. "Ultimately, that's an issue that has to be carried in a presidential campaign." •



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# DUMB AND DUMBER

*By John H. Richardson*

I.

I just got back from Hollywood, where I had breakfast with Ricardo Mestres at the Bel Air Hotel. Mestres shot from Harvard to the head of Disney's Hollywood pictures, only to release a string of flops so unremittingly horrible that finally, after a deathwatch that seemed to go on for years, he lost his job. But there he was, with a spanking new title, dressed with casual confidence in khakis and a plaid shirt, working on his second breakfast of the day. The head of Warner Brothers' film division sat across from us, the new chairman of Disney in the corner. A fire burned in the fireplace, a small rainforest flowered under a crystal chandelier. The room was as quiet as a handful of diamonds tumbling onto jeweler's felt.

Another night, I had dinner with Columbia executive Barry Josephson. This time it was at Morton's, in its airy new space. Barry came in wearing the Hollywood executive uniform—Armani suit, Cartier watch, Italian loafers—and laughed good-naturedly while I examined the labels. Barry has gotten much more humble and charming since he became known as the executive most responsible for *The Last Action Hero.*

I also talked to a studio chairman who just escaped from a corporate meltdown, a producer of mediocre comedies, a screenwriter down on her luck, the wife of a famous hack action director and a lawyer who makes big studio deals. And this is what I can confidently report:

The tuna sashimi at Morton's (on a bed of avocado and mustard greens) was as sweet and delicate as whipped cream, and the lemon pancakes at the Bel Air were delicious with a light raspberry syrup. Life in Hollywood is great—top actors are getting between $12 million and $20 million per picture, the U.S. box office hit almost $5.4 billion last year (the highest it's been since 1960), the telephone companies are jumping in, Ted Turner's New Line/Castle Rock/Turner Pictures empire seems to be emerging as the first new studio in decades. And when Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen announced some vague plans for another new studio, they snapped up a couple of billion dollars just like that. "It's getting more corporate and it's harder to get a decision," the lawyer told me, "but the money is unbelievable."

There's one little problem: that odor in the room ... the stink of the movies. Probably you've wondered about this and then pushed it out of your mind, telling yourself that we only remember the handful of good movies from the old days and not the thousands of lame ones, that the past always seems more glorious, that even the ancient Greeks thought they were the puny descendants of a race of giants, that maybe you just missed all the really good ones. But as the time approaches to watch *Forrest Gump* scoop up all those Oscars, that argument fades, and the inner voice gets louder: these movies suck.

Listen to that inner voice. Hollywood movies are in terrible shape. Our greatest living filmmakers, such as Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen and Francis Ford Coppola, are in slumps of varying lengths. The important social movie like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *On the Waterfront* is all but dead, replaced at best by sincere and unremarkable issue movies like *When A Man Loves A Woman* and *Philadelphia.* The only big-canvas filmmaker of stature we have today is Oliver Stone, God help us.

Just look at our top Oscar contenders. *Gump* was well-made and had a certain sweetness, if you like that sort of thing, but it's still a lot closer to *Beaches* than *The Bridge on the River Kwai. Pulp Fiction* was lively and clever, but at bottom it's just an MTV version of old Hollywood themes, with all the boring parts left out. *Quiz Show* and *Nobody's Fool* get points for trying, but they don't exactly rank with *The Third Man* or *Annie Hall* or *The Godfather.* They're closer to good efforts than good movies.

After that, the bottom drops off dramatically: the dreary sameness of all the erotic thrillers and buddy-o-matic action epics, the dispiritingly endless stream of sequels and remakes and Disney comedies. So many movies feel cobbled-together these days—action films like *True Lies* and *Patriot Games* are so distended by their set-piece action sequences that the rest of the movie feels like filler, and comedies from *Wayne's World* to *The Addams Family* are so perfunctory about

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their stories that they make the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby road movies seem downright sophisticated.

Even the best Hollywood movies of the past decade seem to prove this point. My personal list of favorites includes *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Reversal of Fortune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Dead Ringers*, *GoodFellas* and a few exceptional genre films like *T2* and *Die Hard*. These are ambitious, intelligent movies, with the architectural coherence of art. *Edward Scissorhands* and *Roger Rabbit* create their own magical worlds, setting up internal rules and elaborating them with brilliance. *Reversal of Fortune* is smart on the level of literature, where motives and morals are complex. *T2* and *Die Hard* have the brio of great pop, as *Psycho* did in its time. But, alas, none of these movies felt important. And none came out in the past three years. Like Edward Scissorhands himself, the artists who made them seem so disengaged from the culture at large that they prefer working in their backyards, on topiary gardens.

It's almost a given that the only interesting movies today are coming out of the fringes, from first-time and independent directors enjoying a brief flurry of creative independence before the studios put them to work making Cheez Whiz. But if you actually go and see these movies, you find that most are depressingly short of their hype. From *Slacker* to *Clerks*, they have some fresh and funny moments, but masterpieces of cinema they are not.

Foreign filmmaking isn't much better. A steady trickle of smart imports still arrives—*In The Name of the Father*, *The Piano*, *Heavenly Creatures* and that brief bright stretch of Pedro Almodovar delights in the '80s—but nothing to match the standards of Truffaut, Fellini and Buñuel. Foreign filmmakers seem almost as hobbled by the celluloid past as Americans: *Shallow Grave* is fun filmmaking, but, like *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, it's just a splashy version of a very familiar tale.

This isn't just my opinion. Even in Hollywood, it is the consensus. A screenwriter friend told me it was the times: "Music is over, art is over, movies are over." A studio chairman blamed it on the culture at large, comparing our lite movies to our lite president. A movie publicist told me that, when he went out to sell his wares, he felt like "the emperor's new dry cleaner"—a *publicist*. All of which made Mestres and Josephson perfect sources, the representative men of their time. They had personally launched some of the worst movies of the past five years. Why did they do it? Why Jim Belushi in *Taking Care of Business*? Why Patrick Dempsey in *Run*? What's wrong with Hollywood?

The natural first suspicion is that people like Josephson and Mestres are just overpaid fools. But this assumption is both glib and wrong. Ricardo is like Ozzie and Harriet's smarter son, incredibly well-scrubbed, exuding all-American decency and so disciplined that if he tips the scales an extra pound that morning he'll cut his Chinese chicken salad in half. Barry, too, is a smart, likable, hard-working guy.

So we move to assumption No. 2: maybe they were just trying to give the public the junk they thought it wanted. Absolutely not, they both insist. "Obviously there's this assumption that we've become jaded and just grind out product," Ricardo said. "But we never set out to make a bad movie." They seemed sincere, and I believed them. My jaded publicist friend said the same thing: "Everybody wakes up in the morning and says, 'I want to make a movie that's successful critically and also makes money,' " he told me. "I believe that." (Though he added the last sentence in an almost wistful voice.) I remembered that both Ricardo and Barry have a few good efforts to their (partial) credit: Ricardo with



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*Swing Kids* and *Bound by Honor* and Barry with *In the Line of Fire*. So how did these smart guys wind up making such horrible movies? Ricardo talked about the culture of Disney, about being trapped by the high-concept, low-budget approach to comedy that worked so well for them early in the 1980s, about not having money for stars. And it all made sense, sort of.

Then I remembered a scene from *Taking Care of Business*. Jim Belushi and a Japanese businessman are at a lunch meeting with an obnoxious career woman.

# Sundown

In the more piquant days of film festivals, a director the caliber of Francis Ford Coppola would take the daring step of submitting a work-in-progress against the wishes of its American distributor. When he entered *Apocalypse Now* at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, Coppola wanted to show that his artistic indulgence had created a masterpiece. He also wanted to scold the media for inflating rumors of the troubled production, which he accomplished in an audacious press conference. The director was rewarded by positive reviews, and he shared the Palme d'Or, the prize for best film.

Historically, film festivals have been places filmmakers could go to discuss their work with film scholars. Filmgoers could escape the cop-buddy and girl-gets-boy films shown in shopping malls. Buffs spent entire afternoons discussing tracking shots from Godard films. Director Terrence Malick could get cornered in the bathroom by a struggling actor named Danny DeVito, as happened in the mid-'70s at the New York Film Festival, and sit on the sink for an hour explaining how he made a car chase scene in *Badlands* as psychological as it was physical.

But the major film festivals—Cannes, Sundance, Venice, Berlin, New York and Toronto—are no longer artistic havens for risky films shown in theaters with lumpy seats and halfway-around sound. These festivals are now getaways for Hollywood insiders, mobbed with glitterati masquerading as cognoscenti. They are stocked with films recycled from other festivals and with derivative studio product being premiered for the large media contingent. Now, even that old festival staple, the arthouse film, is often "seriously flawed," as actor Samuel L. Jackson, who served on the jury of the 1995 Sundance Film Festival, said of the eighteen films in competition there. Essentially, over the past several years, Hollywood opinion makers have taken over the film festival circuit and forced it to go Hollywood.

Opinion makers—distributors, agents, producers, publicists, studio executives, hangers-on and even journalists—function at film festivals the way lobbyists function in Washington. What they say is the vox pop sent around the world and, more important, back to L.A. They create the all-important "buzz" that must surround a film for it to be "hyped." They came to power in 1989, when Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* transformed how and why Hollywood attends festivals. Soderbergh's film premiered at Sundance that January and won the Audience Award. The opinion makers returned to Hollywood with news of the hottest discovery since Orson Welles. That May, the film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes. Everyone in Hollywood lined up to get in business with Soderbergh, and the somewhat predictable result has been two films with mixed reviews and poor box office showings. Meanwhile, film festivals forced themselves into an ever more commercial mold to accommodate the swelling crowds who were responding to the opinion makers' hype.

The dirty little secret is that many of the opinion makers don't see the films. "These people have opinions, but they're not their own," explained Bingham Ray, a partner in October Films, a New York-based art-film distributor. "They'll come up to me because they know I see all the films and pull me aside and say, 'Hey, Bingham, what are the hot films?' And I'll tell them that such and such a film is great, even though it was awful. It's the only way I can keep my sanity."

Consider the recently completed 1995 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, the world's penultimate celebration of film—next to Cannes—founded eleven years ago by Robert Redford. On the first Saturday morning, a small, obscure comedy about three Irish-Catholic brothers called *The Brothers McMullan* was screened for the first time. The audience loved it, and the opinion makers took over from there, making it the most talked about of the 104 films screened in and out of competition. The film had been lucky enough to be selected for competition by Festival Director Geoffrey Gilmore. Most people who saw the film and actually thought about it concluded that the film had a robust heart, due mostly to its snappy dialogue, but considered the directing amateurish.

Compelling details of the resourcefulness of the film's director, Edward Burns, spread quickly from the Main Street restaurants to the Deer Valley ski slopes. The actual shoot cost about $20,000, and was drawn from credit cards of family and friends. The director lived on peanut-butter sandwiches in a New York tenement apartment while finishing the film. And for added sympathy, Burns had worked as a production assistant on "Entertainment Tonight" for four years. "It was the watercooler effect," explained Tom Rothman, president of Fox Searchlight Pictures, the upstart art-film division of 20th Century Fox that provided Burns with completion money last fall in exchange for first dibs on distributing the film. "Word spread fast. By Saturday night, everyone knew about this great little film."

The opinion makers elevated *The Brothers McMullan* to *sex, lies and videotape* status. Each year since Soderbergh's patchwork-financed sensation there has been an unwritten rule at Sundance that one low-budget film must emerge as a testament to the gritty integrity of independent filmmaking. Last year, it was Kevin Smith's *Clerks*; in 1993, Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi*; in 1992, Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. This year, it would be *The Brothers McMullan*. Indeed, after being romanced by agents, distributors and the media for a week, Burns called himself "the luckiest man in America." The Monday after the festival his answering machine logged twenty-four messages in one hour.

Those who missed the first screening of *The Brothers McMullan* or only attended the second half of the festival had already been told that this was *the* film. (Serious industry players don't arrive until the festival is half over, enhancing the opinion makers' influence.) To wit: one distributor bumped



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Finally Belushi puts the career woman in her place by walking out on this exit line: "Nice titties." Then the Japanese businessman walks out in solidarity, repeating the line. I think the joke is that he doesn't really know what he's saying, being Japanese. When I first saw this scene I had to rewind my VCR twice to make sure that I'd really seen it, and ever since I have tried to picture Ricardo and his hypersmart then-boss, Jeffrey Katzenberg, sitting in a screening room watching it. What did

*continued on page 26*

into a prominent member of the media who had just arrived for the second half. When the distributor asked if the media person had seen any interesting films, the media person replied, "No, but I know I'm going to love the film I see this afternoon, *The Brothers McMullan*." How was the media person so certain the film would be good? Because, the person explained, important people had said so.

The last vestige of hope for festivals is serendipity, which, though not yet extinct, is rapidly becoming endangered. Ruth Vitale, president of Fine Line Features, the upscale label of New Line Cinema, has been to countless film festivals acquiring films for distribution and searching out talent for existing projects. After seeing two morose films early on at Sundance, Vitale sunk into a torpor. Then she saw *Unzipped*, a documentary about fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi that makes *Prêt-à-Porter* look like *Ready to Wear*. "After ten minutes I was laughing hysterically, so I went out to the pay phone and called (New Line President) Michael Lynne, and said, 'I'm going to buy this film,' " recalled Vitale, who made a verbal agreement for the rights to the film. "It restored my faith in festivals."

But once the opinion makers started a buzz about *Unzipped* and the hype reached other distributors, notably Miramax Films co-topper Harvey Weinstein, the filmmakers realized they could do better. Shortly after Vitale began courting director Douglas Keeve, Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* added to the buzz when she led her critic's notebook with a long passage about *Unzipped*, calling it "hilarious." Back in L.A. after the festival, New Line and Keeve's agents couldn't agree on profit participation, so Keeve's agents put his film back in play. Weinstein, whose company has distributed the fashion flop *Ready to Wear*, quickly scooped it up, giving Keeve a potentially more lucrative deal.

Which brings us to awards. In all, there are eleven different awards at Sundance, encompassing feature film and documentary categories. Most major festivals hand out multiple awards, which serve mainly to validate the opinion makers' message. At Sundance, jury members tend to vote for the film that's the most talked about at the festival and back in Hollywood; this year's Grand Jury prize winner was, not surprisingly, *The Brothers McMullan*. The unscientific Audience Award, meanwhile, is selected by those patient enough to wait around after the credits have rolled and fill out a slip of paper rating the film from one to five. Since audience members don't have the benefit of seeing all the films before rating them, the only way to judge the film they have just seen against ones they haven't is by the intra-festival buzz. Again, the opinion makers hold sway. Once the opinion makers had anointed *Unzipped*, that film became the standard by which all other documentaries would be measured, and therefore, a cinch for the Audience Award.

Even the haughtier foreign festivals are becoming glitzier, more buzz-driven, more opinion maker friendly. Cannes has been tacky and commercial for as long as anyone can remember, largely because of the distributors' acquisition market that runs concurrently with the festival. But even at the Venice Film Festival, the so-called anti-Cannes, art slowly conceded to commerce. In the past few years, Venice has begun inviting the major Hollywood studios to hold European premieres for would-be blockbusters. In 1993 Harrison Ford came to Venice to promote *The Fugitive*, while *Dave* and *In the Line of Fire* were also shown. Steven Spielberg came for a screening of *Jurassic Park*, a movie that, until recently, would never have been offered a film festival imprimatur. Before the screening, Spielberg was presented with a special Golden Lion for career achievement. His appropriately sheepish acceptance speech was interrupted when a giant dinosaur egg rolled onto the stage. "I can't believe I'm on the stage," he admitted, "because most of my movies wouldn't meet the criteria for a film festival." And then he posed with the dinosaur egg.

The Hollywoodization of the film festival has its roots in a larger transformation of the movie business. Because of the business's changing corporate landscape, the term "independent film" no longer means what it once did. Major independents such as New Line (with its Fine Line division) and Miramax have been gobbled up by Turner Broadcasting Corporation and the Walt Disney Company, respectively. Other studios have started classics divisions to distribute arthouse films. Sony Pictures, the parent company of Columbia and TriStar, has Sony Pictures Classics, and 20th Century Fox now has Fox Searchlight.

Sundance founder Robert Redford conceded that this consolidation in Hollywood changed the tenor of the films shown at festivals. Films now need only represent "the independence of the filmmaker's vision," he said this year, rather than be produced outside of the studio system. Redford himself has expressed dismay about being overrun by agents armed with cellular phones, but after all, Sundance is an enterprise. Major corporate sponsors include Gap, Mercedes-Benz and the United Talent Agency.

Alas, even the most idealistic renegade needs the opinion makers. During this year's Sundance, six disgruntled filmmakers staged their own festival, called "Slamdance '95, Anarchy in Utah: The First Annual Guerilla International Film Festival." Slamdance started out in Salt Lake City, a half-hour from Park City, with eleven films on its program, all by first-time directors and all rejected by Sundance. This was going to be a festival for people who couldn't get tickets to Sundance, or were tired of cruising Main Street for a parking space. But even this avowedly anti-commercial group soon wavered. By the end of the first week, Slamdance was more of a joke than a festival. The rookie cineasts moved to Park City and screened their films in the conference room of the hotel of choice for the opinion makers.

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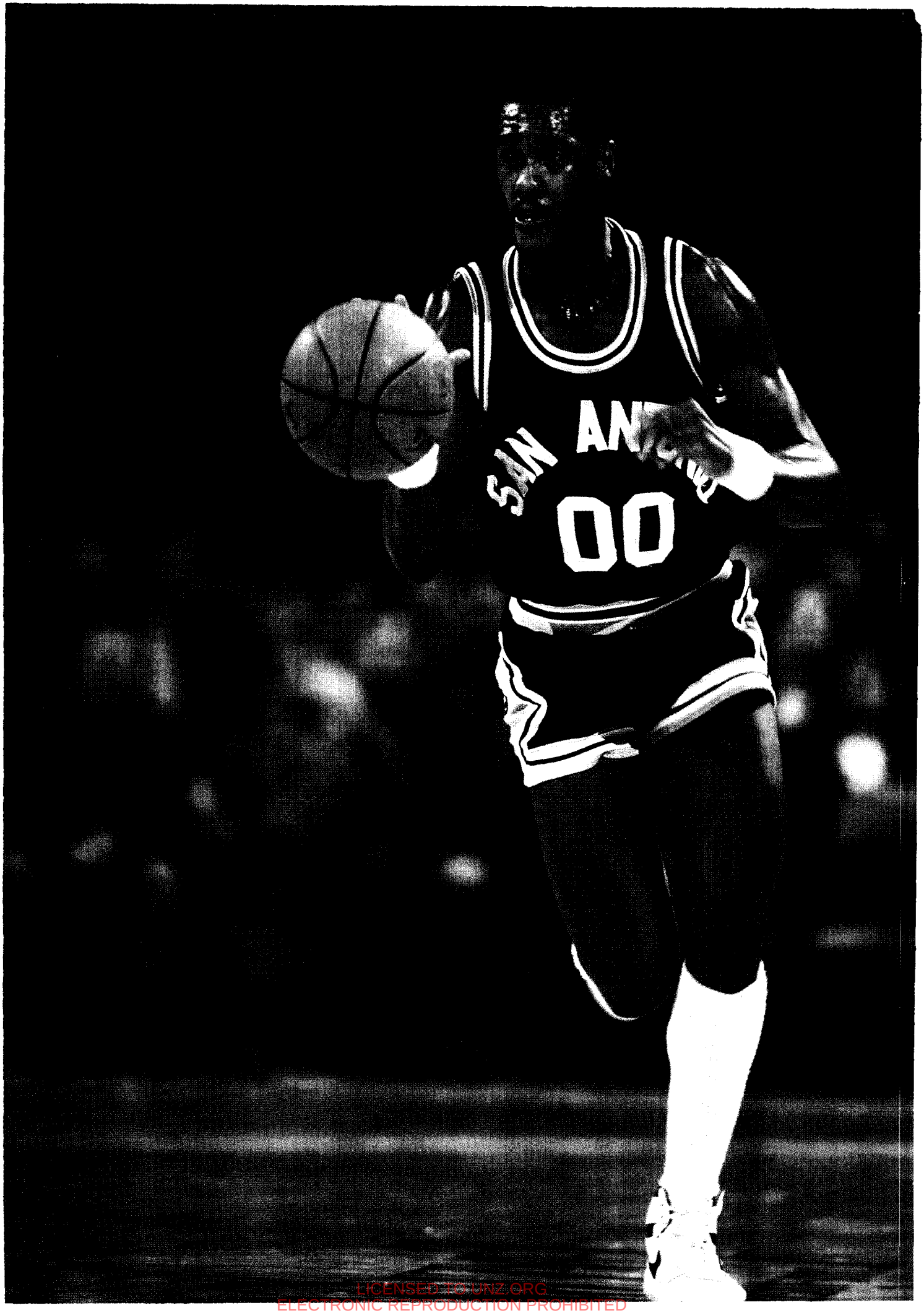


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*"I was thinking, 'If I can just get to the game, I'll be all right.'"*

JOHNNY MOORE
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

The point guard for the Spurs never made it to that game against the Lakers back in 1985. Instead, he landed in the hospital, where after 10 days he was diagnosed with a deadly infection.

For months, Johnny was plagued by excruciating headaches and terrible nausea. His doctors told him he might go blind and lose the use of his limbs. They said he might even die.

Thanks to excellent care and a medication made possible by the research we do, none of these came to pass. And Johnny got another shot at life.

Our health care system should ensure that this research continues, so companies like Pfizer can find new medications. And help more people like Johnny.

"They told me I'd probably never have kids," he says. "And now I've got my little girl. I'm so thankful."

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they say to each other? What did they think? Did their wives see this movie?

Ricardo explained it this way: they knew the picture wasn't working, but they couldn't stop it. "You hire the director, and the director owns the set." The director of *Taking Care of Business* was Arthur Hiller, who had just directed *Outrageous Fortune*. Which made him considerably hotter than most of the people Disney hired in those days, when they were avatars of the faster-cheaper-better school of filmmaking. So what were they going to do? Fire him and hire somebody who *hadn't* just directed a hit?

And what was Barry going to do? Having worked as a manager and producer, he'd just gotten his first job as a studio executive when he found the script then called *Extremely Violent*. It seemed pretty funny, with a hooky high-concept about a comic book movie hero coming into the real world. Then Arnold Schwarzenegger committed to it, and Barry roped in director John McTiernan (*Die Hard*) and hired Shane Black (*Lethal Weapon*) to fix the script. From the standpoint of an executive, Barry was doing great. He had assembled a big star, a hot screenwriter, a hot director. And if he did start to worry about the script not quite coming together, what was he going to do? With a big hole in the summer schedule to fill, and the production clock ticking away, was he going to say *The Last Action Hero* wasn't ready to go? *Not* make his first picture with the hottest star in Hollywood?

## II.

So they are not fools, and they are not just cynically making junk. The answer, as always, is that the machine makes what it is set up to make. Contemporary Hollywood has evolved a peculiar culture that is set up to make junk, and there are a lot of very specific reasons for this—calibrations, as it were, on the machine. Here is a partial list:

1. *The deal is more important than the movie.*

Hollywood isn't really geared to make movies anymore, as it was during the studio system, when actors were chattel on long-term contract. Now the town is geared to make deals, to sign actors and directors to projects, and the movie is just the by-product of the deal. When Barry started *The Last Action Hero*, he made a great deal. As an executive, that was really almost all he could do. It was up to the other guys to make the movie. Same with *Baby's Day Out*. When John Hughes went to Fox's Joe Roth and said he'd like to follow up *Home Alone* with a movie about a baby loose in New York City, was Roth going to say no? Would you? Would you have said no to a package of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ivan Reitman and Danny DeVito, even if the idea of Schwarzenegger pregnant made you a little nervous? It works the other way, too; despite its stream of horrible movies, Disney gave up a chance to sign Tim Burton to a long-term contract because Burton didn't want to give up all the merchandising rights (theme parks, toys, etc.) to his characters—so Disney lost the chance to work with a brilliant director because of greed over a deal point.

2. *The rise of the executive.*

The last great period of American movies was during the early 1970s, when the baffled older generation of Hollywood let the kids take over and unleashed such directors as Scorsese, Coppola, Bob Rafelson and Peter Bogdanovich. Then Michael Cimino brought all that to a halt with *Heaven's Gate*, spending so much money that he bankrupted United Artists—a studio that often boasted of its executive-free policy of letting the filmmakers make their movies without interference (and which gave us *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, *West Side Story*, *In The Heat of the Night*, *Annie Hall*, *Rocky* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). After that, the executives took over. Suddenly they were everywhere. On the lower levels, they micromanaged script development as never before. On the higher levels, they second-guessed the executives on the lower levels. They loved nothing more than to make movies of off pitches, because then they were the stars (a trend that has slowed, thankfully). All of which led to movies like *The Rocketeer* or *Alien3*, so tortured by executives in the production process that they ended up almost lifeless. Contrast those with films that rose out of total production chaos, like *Casablanca*, *Apocalypse Now* and even (on a much lesser level) *The Fugitive*.

3. *The rise of everybody but writers and directors.*

Once I heard John Huston tell a joke. It was late in his life, and he was carrying an oxygen bottle everywhere he went, taking a suck on a tube whenever the air in the real world got too thin. "These two producers were lost in the desert," Huston began, in his scratchy wised-up voice. "They're dying of thirst, crawling along, when"—suuuck—"they come upon an oasis. What a beautiful sight! They're saved! They fall to their knees, and one of them scoops the delicious sweet water to his face when"—suuuuccck—"the other producer stops him. 'Wait,' he shouts. 'Let me piss in it first.' " Since Huston's day, with the growing power of agents, executives, actors, even lawyers, that's been the rule. Ask the artists, if you're in the mood to hear a bitter diatribe. Director Tim Hunter told me once that he had made *River's Edge* from a first draft, because even though it might have been a little better rewritten, he was afraid the development process would leach out the peculiar moments that made the movie so fresh, like Dennis Hopper toting around an inflatable love doll. Hunter was perfectly happy to extend his experience to a categorical imperative: "I think the movies would be better if people just shot first drafts," he said. I'll go even further: in the theater the writer is king and directors know their place, and that's the way it should be. Hollywood got this backward because film evolved from scriptless spectacle to silent film to talkie. By the time it became a fully literary activity, the director already had hegemony. And just when it seemed impossible, things are getting worse—with the general decline in reverence for non



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airport books, Hollywood's necessary-evil feeling about writers has gotten out of control. Whenever possible they find writers who don't seem like real writers, guys working as lifeguards or ex-Navy Seals. "Get me rewrite" has gone from joke to fad, with as many as thirty writers teaming up on a single script, as with *The Flintstones*. This makes the executives and producers feel more creative, since they are guiding the process, but it doesn't make for great scenarios. Almost without exception, individuals write the best movies, from Preston Sturges to James Agee to Paul Schrader.

4. *The rise of screenwriting programs.*

The 1980s also saw a tremendous increase in screenwriting programs. On an assignment for a magazine, I took one of these courses, and learned that a movie should introduce two buddies, build their relationship to a crisis, separate the buddies so that they can learn some lessons on their own and then bring them back together. This is the model of movies as different as *Rain Man* and *E.T.* The reason I didn't emerge from the course with a million-dollar screenplay is because taking the course doesn't teach you how to create characters like the rain man or E.T. All it does is give you a glib way to talk about your plot and an artificial way to look at structure. The damage would be limited to a few thousand hapless screenplays except for one thing: executives take these classes.

"Every executive I know has taken them," one told me. They go on their own, the better to learn "structure." Pity the poor screenwriter, faced with dozens of pages of notes asking: What is the inciting incident? Who is the antagonist? And this may get even worse with the rise of computer screenwriting programs. At dinner with my screenwriter friend in L.A. (at Woo Lae Oak, Hollywood's Korean restaurant, where the tuna sashimi rivals Morton's), she told me excitedly about a brand new computer program that takes any given premise and spits out all the possible story developments. I have a sinking feeling we have just found out whether movies can get even worse.

5. *Jeffrey Abrams.*

More than anyone else, Abrams was the writer who exemplified the high-concept, Robert McKee's Story Structure™ approach to screenwriting: yuppie loses his filofax, escaped con finds it and takes over his life while yuppie goes through morally uplifting poverty. Yuppie gets shot in the head (how's that for an inciting incident?) and becomes as a child again. Abrams did not come up with Vegas-lounge-lizard-becomes-king-of-England, but I am holding him spiritually responsible. The real problem is that executives love this kind of story, partly because they're easy to sell on a poster and partly because they're easy to defend—it's not like we were doing complex family drama, boss—we were doing yuppie-shot-in-the-head. We were doing crook-finds-filofax. Once in a while these movies do work—a mermaid in Manhattan? Talk about yer fish out of water!—but most of the time they turn out to be as thin as the ideas they are based on. Remember cop-gives-waitress-two-million-dollar-tip? How about hooker-with-heart-of-gold-pretends-to-be-guy's-girlfriend? Or guy-offers-one-million-dollars-to-sleep-with-your-wife?

6. *The hit-driven film economy.*

Increasingly, Hollywood films are divided into hits or misses, strikeouts or home runs. Budgets continue to rise. (The average studio film cost $34 million last year.) It is also more and more expensive to promote big movies—a "prints and ads" budget of $30 million is not uncommon. This inflation puts even more pressure on the big movies to perform, giving more power to the actors who might open them. This year Kevin Costner got script approval and his choice of



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director for *Waterworld*, two decisions that helped drive the budget upward of $170 million even before promotional expenses (and the storm that sunk the set). These economic realities make it less likely for studios to take any risks at all, on big or small pictures. There are also some arcane reasons driving studios to the blockbuster mentality, such as the "terms" clause in distribution contracts that gives a studio its biggest cut in a movie's first weeks of release—generally the terms (after exhibitor expenses) are 90 to 10 favoring the studio, which means that a movie that builds on word of mouth makes the studio much less money than a movie that opens to 30 million and drops quickly. This structure makes a smash more profitable than a sleeper that grosses more. Terms can be renegotiated, but it's not easy. This shift began with the antitrust breakup of the studio theater chains in 1948 and went into high gear after *Jaws*, when studios shifted from platform releases to wide releases, and the mark of success shifted from "playdates" (how many theaters a movie was playing in) to grosses.

7. *Everybody knows that nobody knows everything.*

Over the last decade, William Goldman's famous phrase explaining Hollywood—"nobody knows anything"—has become so popular it is practically a mantra. This has had a subtle demoralizing effect, encouraging executives like Barry and Ricardo to ignore their own judgment. As Ricardo put it: "You never know. Plenty of movies you think are trash turn out unbelievable, and vice versa." That much is true, but beyond that, Goldman is dead wrong. Hitchcock knew something about making thrillers. Scorsese knows something about obsession. And William Goldman knows something about writing scripts.

8. *General pervasive corporate cowardice.*

Hollywood screenwriters tell this joke: A screenwriter turns in his script, and the next day he calls his executive to ask what he thought. "I don't know," says the executive. "I'm the only one who read it." Like Ricardo, today's Hollywood is almost universally well-scrubbed and hardworking. They alternate fat-free meals with Met-Rx shakes and never drink more than one cocktail. They also live in constant fear of losing their vastly overpaid jobs, so their primary purpose is to make sure nothing goes wrong. That means that their real secret jobs are to say no—if they say yes, they might get stuck with some wildman with a vision. Every now and then these nervous suits try to get more control by eliminating the producer and making the movies themselves. What they don't understand is that most people who make great movies are out of control, from Von Stroheim with his amazing eleven-hour mogul-maddening *Greed* to, yes, Michael Cimino. (Have you actually seen *Heaven's Gate*? It's darn close to being a brilliant movie.) The simple truth is that corporations don't make great movies, mavericks do, and mavericks are almost by definition erratic, free-spending, frequently intoxicated and generally unmanageable. It's no accident that one of the few brilliant studio records in recent history—the mid-'70s run at Paramount that gave us *The Godfather* and *Chinatown*—was supervised by a bunch of maverick executives with cocaine straws surgically attached to their nostrils. But that logic will never move the suits; better to make cookie-cutter high-concept films, the kind of movie a corporation can understand.

9. *There is too much money.*

Hollywood is a homogeneous place. Almost everyone likes rock and took drugs in the '60s and tries to stay true to the hippie spirit (even though you have to manage your money wisely) and pays at least lip service to feminism. Everyone likes pleasure and welcomes new ideas and loves art deco and keeps up with the new bands. And they're all white. The problem here isn't their politics—only a Philistine judges art exclusively (or even primarily) by its politics—but the insularity of their lives. They've been everywhere, but they spend a lot of time at the hotel.

10. *Body-snatching foreign directors.*

To combat their insularity, Hollywood quickly hires any foreign director whose films show any potential for slickness. But then it puts them through the Hollywood mind-meld. One Hollywood wife of my acquaintance, married to a man who went from foreign art films to Hollywood action epics, calls this the "invasion of the pod people." They become obsessed with box office, success, the taste of the audience. The examples are many and depressing: Peter Weir going from *The Last Wave* to *Green Card*, Kenneth Branagh from *Henry V* to *Frankenstein*, Michael Caton-Jones from *Scandal* to *Doc Hollywood*, Fred Schepsi from *Devil's Playground* and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* to—does someone have a handkerchief?—*Mr. Baseball.*

11. *General pervasive corporate cowardice II: movie stars as job insurance.*

Stars are paid huge salaries on the theory that they can open movies. Most of the time they don't, though. The list of movies that hit without stars goes on almost forever: *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, *Dirty Dancing*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *48 Hrs.*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Easy Rider* . . . and so on. Again we have to ask if people in Hollywood are just total morons or if there is some systemic cause. Again, the answer is the less satisfying one. Movie stars are insurance. Maybe they'll open the picture, maybe not, but at least they will give you some bragging rights about working with a big star. (Remember that bragging rights are a medium of exchange in Hollywood, making an executive or producer "hot" and bringing in more opportunities.) Stars also attract material, and directors, so it's good to be friendly with them. And stars are also represented by agents, and if you have no friends among agents, you'll get last pick of everything—witness the drought of decent material Disney's Jeffrey Katzenberg experienced when he went to war with superagent Mike Ovitz.

12. *Everyone is creative.*

The most obnoxious phrase in Hollywood is "I'm good with story." Anyone who says this is wrong. Wha



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real artists know is that every story is specific, growing out of character and place, and that it has certain organic requirements, and that often a story's peculiarities and mistakes are part of what make it unique. That's why they're so nervous every time they start a new one. In the rush to mark scripts with their scent, creative executives and actors and directors and producers forget that you can add a lot of great colors together, but unless you really know what you're doing you end up with brown.

13. *Corporate mentality trickle-down effect.*

Everyone goes to Hollywood with dreams of making great movies. But the town is hard to crack, very hard, and people adapt to every system by doing the things the system rewards. So after a few years of failure they settle for making successful ones. Then they suppress the memory of their early ideals and begin to develop a fetish for telling everyone their grosses. And that's the best-case scenario. I know a smart woman who went to Hollywood to write screenplays and made a quick sale, but after a while she started to feel her own ideas were too esoteric. Perhaps they were, but instead of getting out of Hollywood, she became obsessed with learning "the formula." I actually heard her use the phrase, "That's not the formula." The moral of the story is that writing for an audience, though often invigorating, tends to corrupt the artistic soul ... and writing for an audience that you feel is beneath you really corrupts your soul. And Hollywood today is a deeply corrupt place.

## III.

Those are the small reasons, some of them. But the biggest reason for Hollywood's current malaise is the same thing that has always been its strength. By its nature, Hollywood is the most democratic of art forms, tuned to the public like Liberace's piano. And when Hollywood meets the public's highest and most passionate needs, the result can be glorious—as the Depression gave us *Sullivan's Travels* and Vietnam gave us *The Deer Hunter.*

But today we are mired deep in the slough of postmodernism. Arthur C. Danto says art ended a few decades ago, and Francis Fukuyama says history itself has ended. It seems as if all that's left for us to do is to root among the shells and rinds of old forms, rearranging them (or in the case of certain Republican politicians, resurrecting them). While it's likely that these guys are suffering a bad case of what William Safire once called "anomie-too-ism," there's no doubt that as a nation we've got a major case of the blahs. We suffer from what literary critic Harold Bloom calls "belatedness." Even our bands are stuck, redoing punk, redoing thrash, redoing country, redoing rap ad nauseum. They don't sing to warn us about the hard rain gonna fall, they sing, "I want to be Bob Dylan." So we sit in front of our T.V.s channel-surfing, waiting for the next big thing. Maybe it'll be the Internet, maybe virtual reality....

The movies reflect this malaise. They flop around, desperately trying to please us, but the one thing they dare not do is try to challenge us—because we don't want them to. As candy drives out vegetables, wish-fulfillment has driven out all attempt at realism. Movies have always told lies, given us *Top Hat* in the middle of the Depression, but now that's all they tell us. A movie like *The Best Years of Our Lives* is inconceivable today. Happy-ending-itis marred one of this year's few decent movies, *The Shawshank Redemption*—any gritty prison movie that ends up with two ex-cons embracing on a beach has gone grievously offtrack. Filmmakers justify their lies with paeans to the power of the imagination (remember *Radio Flyer*?), to the "true lies" of art, like sweaty rapists insisting on their innocence. The smartest figure out a fresh way to give us the same old lie, and we reward them lavishly. What is *Forrest Gump* but the story of a new superhero, Stupidman, who flies through all the traumas of our time without a single scratch, and gets rich, too.

There are signs of hope. Some of the very movies I've been attacking here also hint that Hollywood is getting restless. Consider this unexpected similarity between *Pulp Fiction* and *Forrest Gump*: as *Pulp Fiction* breaks tradition with its trochal form, so *Gump* breaks the contemporary rules, taking the Seinfeld-like approach of telling a story about a guy sitting on a bench, with hardly any sex, little violence, no plot, no antagonist. These may be incremental changes, but they are real, and the vast popularity of *Pulp* and *Gump* show that the audience is ready for a change, too. There are also movies out there doing their best to finish off their tired genres once and for all, as *Natural Born Killers* tried to kill off the lovers-on-the-lam movie, and *The Last Action Hero* tried to explode the action movie. Even the Philistine foreign market made a giant hit—$198 million!—out of the steroid-free *Four Weddings and a Funeral.*

Who knows, maybe even Ricardo Mestres and Barry Josephson will be part of a brighter future. Ricardo has landed Robin Williams to star in a script called *Jack*, with Francis Ford Coppola directing, and Barry was promoted to president of production at Columbia, where there's a buzz on his upcoming releases, *Bad Boys* and *Money Train.* I hope all three movies are great, I really do. It's true that *Jack* is another inner-child story about a kid who grows so fast that he looks 40 when he's still just 10, and *Bad Boys* and *Money Train* sound like your basic action fair, but there's always hope, and the trailers are always bright with promise. So maybe if we just keep wishing on our movie stars (and click our heels together three times) there will be a happy ending for us all. In the meantime, you'll find me sitting in some overpriced restaurant, picking at another plate of tuna sashimi and drinking a vodka martini—straight up with an olive. And make it a double, please. I'm on my way to the Multiplex, and I need all the help I can get. •



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# BOOKS & The Arts

## *Stanley Kauffmann on Films*

### Modest Flame, Violent Fever

Artistic daring takes different forms. Usually it's through unconventional material or style—sometimes both. **Circle of Friends** (Savoy) dares in still another way: by being utterly conventional. It risks a familiar situation, predictable developments, absolutely predictable good people and bad people. It places all its reliance on charm.

That's a dangerous bet, particularly with a film set in Ireland. To be charming in Ireland is like being histrionic in Italy; if you're going to make it an issue, you'd better be particularly good at it because it's a national characteristic. Well, *Circle of Friends* wins its bet.

Against considerable odds. Just glance at the story. Andrew Davies's screenplay, from a Maeve Binchy novel, is about a girl who is an ugly duckling and who remains one but who nevertheless gets the swan. Benny (Bernadette) is the least attractive of three girl friends in a Kilkenny village, but it's Benny who, at first and at last, wins Jack, the handsomest boy around. Not without travail, of course, including the pregnancy of Nan, the prettiest of the girls, for which Jack is falsely held responsible. And not without a drooling suitor for Benny—Sean, who works for her father and who, while pursuing Benny, is also robbing her father. But all ends well, of course, with just enough incredibility to make it a quite satisfactory tale.

The telling of the tale is smooth, except for some of the editing. Benny and Jack both go to Dublin to Trinity College. She has to come home by bus every night, as her parents order; Jack stays in town. And every time we shift from the Kilkenny village to Dublin, or back, the editor gives us a shot of a bus or a car on a country road. It gets a bit mechanical. The filmmakers might have trusted us after a while to understand that we were in one place or the other.

But the people, except for the ratty Sean, are lovely. I don't know Binchy's novel, but the dialogue—fresh and frank and earthily witty—kept reminding me of Edna O'Brien's early novel, *The Country Girls.* (The film is set in 1957, which is just about the period of O'Brien's book.) The director, Pat O'Connor, who did *A Month in the Country* with Kenneth Branagh, has chosen his cast well and has tickled the best out of them. Minnie Driver, known on BBC-TV, is Benny, and she does that difficult but rewarding thing: she plays a girl who thinks herself homely and who is in fact no beauty, and still she makes us understand completely why the male catch of the neighborhood would want her. Chris O'Donnell, who plays Jack, must be irritating to a lot of young Irish actors. He's American, born in Illinois, familiar here as Al Pacino's young pal in *Scent of a Woman* and will be Robin in a forthcoming *Batman.* O'Connor chose him over native possibilities and had him coached in the right Irish accent; and O'Donnell more than persuades.

Benny's two close friends are the appealing Geraldine O'Rawe and Saffron Burrows. Poor Alan Cumming has the drudgery of playing Sean, drawn as so unsavory a wretch that even Dickens might have relented a little. Colin Firth is a different sort of dastard, the local Protestant gentry who has his will of a girl and, when she is "caught," tries to buy her off.

*Circle of Friends* keeps its word. Like an old-fashioned theater program, it tells you early on who and what each of its characters is—and so they prove to be, enjoyably. Something more than a bonus is Kenneth MacMillan's cinematography. (He did Branagh's *Henry V.*) MacMillan does exactly what he's supposed to do with the Irish landscape: he makes us wish we were there.

For some reason known only to him and his God, Dustin Hoffman has decided to be Harrison Ford. For instance, toward the end of **Outbreak** (Warner Bros.), Hoffman does the following in the course of one day: he flies by helicopter from northern California to San Francisco; persuades a government official to give him information about a freighter; by helicopter finds the freighter on a foggy day; jumps from the aircraft to the ship; fortuitously discovers a clue about an infected monkey; climbs back on the helicopter (we don't see this but it must have happened); proceeds to a home in California where he induces a little girl to lure the escaped monkey out of the woods; then transports the monkey back to a lab in a stricken town so that a serum can be prepared from the monkey's blood in time to save Hoffman's wife and the people of the town.

I forgot to mention that Hoffman is a colonel in the U.S. Army Medical Corps,

### FILMS WORTH SEEING

**Martha and I.** *Czechoslovakia before the war; the Nazi intrusion into a loving marriage between a Jewish doctor and his German wife. Rich with sad remembrance. (Reviewed 3/13/95)* **Mina Tannenbaum.** *Another Jewish story—after the war in Paris. A graceful, lyrical, shadowed account of deep friendship between two girls growing up. (3/27/95)* **Once Were Warriors.** *Ghettoized Maori life in a New Zealand city. The patterns are familiar, but the specifics are revealing. Fine acting. (3/27/95)* **Through the Olive Trees.** *An Iranian director investigates the lives of a young couple who have been in a previous film of his. Delightfully quiet, engaging. (3/20/95)*—**SK**



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working on disease control. (His chief assistant, a virologist, happens to know how to pilot a helicopter and flies Hoffman around that day against orders, evading armed interception.) With all this bustle, Hoffman doesn't get the chance, or need, to act: he just does things, like Ford.

The above is only part of a hyperventilated plot based on a threat that is much in the news these days: plagues, which may in certain hands be deliberately spread and against which there is no known defense. In speed of spread and of fatality, we are told, AIDS can't compare. As a prologue we are shown how an African village is bombed to bits because it is infected with a highly contagious virus for which no cure in known. With this forewarning, *Outbreak* pins its drama on a presidential order to do the same thing to a California town for the same reason.

The hokum of convenient junctures and derring-do action doesn't do much for the seriousness of the theme. I couldn't help longing for—at least as I remember it—Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), in which two crooks kill an immigrant for his money and unknowingly catch a disease the man brought with him. The police thus have a particularly urgent reason to catch the criminals, who may unintentionally kill many more. I remember the Kazan film as more lean and taut and scary.

This whooped-up screenplay was cowritten by Lawrence Dworet who, after eighteen years of medical practice, has evidently decided (like Michael Crichton) to turn his experience to scare-flick profit. Another interesting point from the press notes. The director was Wolfgang Petersen, who made the far superior *In the Line of Fire*. Petersen studied film at an academy in his native Germany where one of his teachers was the exceptional cinematographer Michael Ballhaus. Guess who shot this picture. I wish their collaboration—their first—had come out better. •

**The incongruous achievement of Walter Benjamin.**

# *The Man With Qualities*

**BY DAVID STERN**

Posthumous fame of the sort that has accrued to Walter Benjamin since his suicide at the French-Spanish border in 1940, at the age of 48, is not entirely unique in this century; but it is altogether exceptional in the case of Benjamin, who is easily among the century's most esoteric writers. A youthful Romantic who later converted to Marxism, he was by temperament a scholar and a literary connoisseur in the highest German traditions. After the collapse of the Weimar economy, and then with the rise of Nazi power, as an émigré Jewish intellectual in Paris, he was forced to eke out a living as a freelance reviewer, translator and radio scriptwriter. Known primarily for his literary criticism, he was actually a profound metaphysician who brought to all his work an apocalyptic vision of history and the frustrations of a disappointed lover.

In his allegorical readings of texts—and he treated cities, institutions and experiences as if they were texts—Benjamin took delight in the consummate difficulty of his writing. He once boasted that the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his seminal dissertation on German baroque tragedy—which he was forced to withdraw from consideration when his faculty readers at the University of Frankfurt claimed not to understand a word of it—was "unmitigated chutzpah." Composed in a prose that deliberately eschewed conventional argument for the tense force of insight, these "profane illuminations" (Benjamin's own inspired term for surrealist works of art) demand interpretation even more than most of the authors whom Benjamin chose as his subjects.

Since the posthumous publication of his work—much of which never appeared in print during his lifetime—such interpretations have abounded. Marxist critics have been eager to seize upon him as a patron saint, while Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism and Benjamin's intimate, was only the first to argue that Benjamin superimposed Marxism upon a religious, and ultimately mystical, imagination. As more of his writings have reached print, both in the original German and in translation, they have spawned a virtual industry, of which Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illumination* and Jeffrey Mehlman's *Walter Benjamin for Children* are only two recent products. The former is an intelligent study of Benjamin's encounter with surrealism, and in particular the work of André Breton, and his attempt to meld psychoanalysis and Marxism. Mehlman's book is a more contrived effort that seeks, with insufficient justification, to read the radio plays for children that Benjamin wrote during the late 1920s—a neglected but truly fascinating aspect of Benjamin's oeuvre—as though they were the unedited transcripts of a psychoanalysis that Benjamin never underwent.

*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*
edited and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno
translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson
(University of Chicago Press, 651 pp., $45)

*Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*
by Richard Wolin
(University of California Press, 316 pp., $14 paper)

*Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years*
by Jeffrey Mehlman
(University of Chicago Press, 117 pp., $17.50)

*Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*
by Margaret Cohen
(University of California Press, 271 pp., $35)

*Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*
by Robert Alter
(Harvard University Press, 131 pp., $19.95)

*L'Ange de l'Histoire*
by Stéphane Mosès
(Editions du Seuil, 259 pp.)

DAVID STERN is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and during the current year, a fellow of the Program in Alternative Thinking at Tel Aviv University. His book, *Midrash and Theory: Reading Classical Jewish Interpretation as Literature* will be published by Northwestern University Press next year.



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As both these studies indicate, the Benjamin of the 1990s, the postmodernist Benjamin, is read as a self-consciously eclectic thinker who, in collage-like fashion, fused the most disparate intellectual materials. For such readers, no feature of Benjamin's thought has been more sought after than his bleak conception of the past, which he envisioned, as he wrote in an oft-quoted passage, as "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage." Still, as Richard Wolin argues in *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, the best book-length intellectual biography of Benjamin available in English, these postmodernist readings fail to appreciate the redemptive urge behind Benjamin's view of the past.

No matter how dark and disconsolate his view of history, there always existed for Benjamin a vision of utopian possibility residing beyond the desolate landscape of the present. As Wolin lucidly shows, throughout his work Benjamin was always committed to "redemptive critique," in Jürgen Habermas's phrase. For Benjamin, the moral duty of criticism was to "redeem" the past, to save it from oblivion by revealing its concealed truth, by retrieving from the detritus of history what Benjamin called its "now-times," moments of "perfectly reconciled happiness," which, he believed, prefigured redemption.

This bold and impassioned conception—so distant from the academic version of literary criticism—is perhaps Benjamin's single most powerful legacy. It also provides a thread that, if it does not unify his essentially discontinuous thought, nonetheless runs continuously through his work. What still remains unaccounted for are the contradictions in Benjamin's career: the logic behind his conversion to Marxism (while vacationing on the island of Capri in 1924, when he met and fell in love with the Latvian actress and Bolshevik Asja Lacis); or the links between the truly mind-boggling range of interests that drew his attention—from Goethe and Proust to children's toys, hashish and the effect of modern technology upon the work of art. What remains inexplicable above all is, for lack of a better word, Benjamin's sheer strangeness as a person, his genuine peculiarity.

At least one major reason for our inability to grasp Benjamin's intellectual and personal singularity is the absence of satisfactory biographical material. Although every line he wrote is indelibly stamped by the mark of his singular style of mind, which Hannah Arendt called "thinking poetically," Benjamin himself strove for a kind of Virgilian impersonality in his writing, seeking to eliminate everything but Mind, which, he claimed, was all that counted. Even his few presumably autobiographical writings, such as the very Proustian memoir of childhood called "A Berlin Chronicle," with its evocations of bottomless fin-de-siècle melancholy, are less about his real childhood than about the mysteriousness of the city in which he grew up, its haunting temptations and its lurking humiliations.

Apart from such texts, and a few brief memoirs by acquaintances, the only significant work that treats his actual life is Scholem's *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, which focuses, as its title states, mainly on the relationship between the two men. Though it is full of valuable factual material, the book has perpetuated the "one Benjamin" thesis—according to which Benjamin must have been either a theologian *or* a Marxist—more than it has helped solve the puzzle of his contradictory life. Precisely for this reason, the publication of *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940* is a welcome addition to the works of Benjamin available in English.

DRAWING BY JACK COUGHLIN FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Or it should have been. The volume, though readably translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson from the original German edition of 1966, will probably be of interest, alas, only to specialists. The German publisher Suhrkampf Verlag required the translators to present a strict replica of the original volume, without adding a single note or explanation; and so the annotations in this English edition are so sparse, with only the briefest biographical comments on Benjamin's correspondents and mainly bibliographical references to the obscure books and essays mentioned in the letters, that unless one is already an expert on Benjamin's life and times, many of the letters in the collection will be virtually impenetrable. It should also be noted that the word "correspondence" in the English title (for the German *Briefe*, or letters) is not quite accurate, since the book contains, with the exception of a few letters to Benjamin, only Benjamin's side of his correspondence.

Even so, for those willing to plough their way through it, this volume is the closest approximation to the autobiography that Benjamin never wrote. The original editors of the collection, Scholem and Theodor Adorno—in a collaboration that virtually epitomized Benjamin's "Janus-face," as he called his dual allegiances to theology and historical materialism—chose some 330 examples from the 600 surviving letters that Benjamin wrote. Stretching over nearly the entirety



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of his adult life, from his eighteenth birthday until less than two months before his death, these include Benjamin's correspondence with such figures as Hugo von Hoffmannsthal (who was the first major literary figure to recognize Benjamin's genius and to publish him); Martin Buber (who also published him and whom Benjamin detested, not always justly); Florens Christian Rang (a Christian theologian and one of Benjamin's closest confidantes who embodied "whatever essential elements of German culture I have internalized"); Bertolt Brecht (whose epic theater Benjamin was among the first to champion and who, as a Marxist, especially influenced Benjamin); Adorno (who was the closest thing to a disciple that Benjamin ever had, albeit a critical one) and Adorno's wife Gretel; Max Horkheimer, Adorno's co-director at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research (which supported Benjamin during the years of his Paris exile through a small subsidy); Scholem (the letters to whom comprise more than one-third of the volume); and a host of other significant literary and cultural figures of the time—Rainer Maria Rilke, Hannah Arendt, Werner Kraft, Robert Weltsch. If nothing else, this volume should lay to rest the belief that Benjamin was an unknown figure in his lifetime. He may have been ignored or rejected by the literary and academic establishment, but it is abundantly clear from the letters how deeply implicated he was in the cultural life of the period, and particularly so in its more radical and avant-garde movements.

Unavoidably, the book is not comprehensive. Many of Benjamin's letters that one would most like to read—to his wife Dora, to his son Stefan, to Asja Lacis—were unavailable to the editors or were lost in the war, as were those to such professional colleagues as Ernst Bloch and André Breton. Still, this volume provides a fuller picture of Benjamin's development. For purely biographical interest, because they document an otherwise unknown period of his life, probably the most unusual (though not the most interesting) letters in the collection are its earliest ones from Benjamin's late adolescence and early adulthood. These letters depict a young man who could be both irresistibly charming and unbearably precocious, but—unlike the picture of himself Benjamin sometimes painted—not more tormented or tragic than other young men of the same age or of that period.

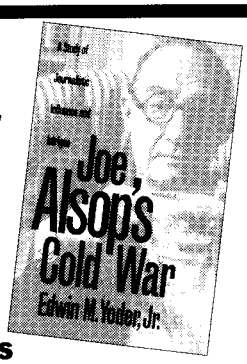
These early letters contain lines that anticipate the perverse brilliance of Benjamin's later aphoristic style ("The prostitute represents the consummated will to culture...: she drives nature from its last sanctuary, sexuality"). But there is also much in them that is platitudinous. ("Who knows what the extent of woman's spirituality actually is? What do we really know about woman? As little as we do about youth.") And there is a good deal of the comic (or pathetic) intellectual pomposity of a 20-year-old. "Today I felt the awesome truth of Christ's words: Behold, the kingdom of God is not of this world but within us," he wrote to a young female acquaintance named Carla Seligson, whom he was trying to convince to go out with him. "I would like to read with you Plato's dialogue on love, where this is as beautifully expressed and with such profound insight as probably nowhere else."

These early letters also point to some darker, less attractive sides of his character. Foremost of these was Benjamin's tendency to form powerful attachments with figures of "certainty," that is, with persons who appeared to Benjamin to embody causes or ideas with a single-minded determination untouched by the hesitations and the ambivalences that seem to have characterized everything Benjamin himself felt. The letters during this early period mainly chronicle his involvement in the German Youth Movement, the highly popular groups that began in Germany in the beginning of the century as a revolt of youth against the decaying bourgeois values of their parents' generation and sought to elevate youth itself into an ideal of moral authenticity.

Benjamin—unlikely as it may seem, given his later aversion to organizations and social formalities—became one of the main spokesmen for a splinter group of the movement that was led by his former teacher Gustav Wyneken. Benjamin literally idolized Wyneken. "My thinking always has Wyneken, my first teacher, as my starting point and always returns to him," he wrote to a fellow member. In other letters he enthusiastically spouted typical Youth Movement formulations about the "constantly reverberating feeling for the abstractness of pure spirit" and "the eternally actualizing soul" from which "every person, every soul that is born, can produce the new reality."

In the course of his later life, Benjamin's tendency to identify with such "personifications of certainty" repeated itself several times—with Rang, with Brecht, especially with Scholem. Yet when Wyneken, like other leaders of the German Youth Movement, supported the First World War for reasons


20TH CENTURY LEADERS

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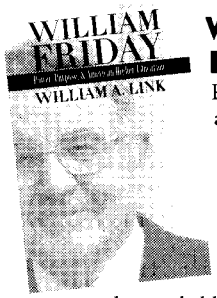


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of fervent patriotism, Benjamin, who was passionately opposed to the war, ended his affiliation with his idol with a feeling of absolute betrayal. "Dear Dr. Wyneken," he wrote, "I am totally and unconditionally disassociating myself from you. You have sacrificed young people to that state which has taken everything from you." And shortly later, with a ruthlessness that disclosed a moral high-handedness incapable of compromise, Benjamin abruptly cut off relations with nearly all his former friends from the Youth Movement, refusing even to talk about this entire period in his life.

Benjamin's break with Wyneken on account of the war, which forced Benjamin to move to Switzerland to avoid conscription in the German Army, was the first of several watershed events in his life. The letters from the Switzerland years, which are inexplicably silent about the war, paint a picture of what appears to have been one of the happier periods of his life. Living in Switzerland with his wife Dora (with whom he became involved while she was still married to one of his former friends) and his infant son Stefan, and supported by his well-to-do parents, Benjamin enjoyed the charmed life of a *Privatgelehrter*, the independent scholar. He continued his studies, immersing himself in late Romantic literature and philosophy (whose impress never quite left him); and he freely indulged his two main passions, bibliography and book-collecting.

Beginning in 1921, however, the letters begin to chart the progressively unhappier course of his life. First, his initially promising academic career faltered, ultimately collapsing in the fiasco of his failed dissertation in 1925. As the letters show, however, Benjamin actually expressed great relief at the failure, confessing that he secretly dreaded "lectures, students, etc. ... such things that take a murderous toll on time"! Then, with the collapse of the Weimar economy, his parents withdrew their financial support. As his marriage disintegrated as well, Benjamin was forced into the grim poverty of exile in Paris and began to live what seems to have been an incessantly itinerant existence, shuttling endlessly between countries, islands, cities and apartments, yet writing prodigiously "like someone who has been shipwrecked, who carries on while drifting on the wreckage by climbing to the peak of the mast that is already crumbling."

The letters from this last period give substance to the image of Benjamin as the emblematically homeless Jewish intellectual, as spiritually uprooted as he was geographically uprooted. This is also the period, it seems, in which the writing of letters assumed paramount importance in Benjamin's life. Obviously, owing to the physical distance that lay between him and most of his friends, the only way he could keep in contact was through correspondence. Still, there may have been other reasons why Benjamin was so passionately, even obsessively, attached to letters. As Adorno notes in his introductory essay, the epistolary form provided him with the perfect medium for simulating the intimacy of a personal conversation while at the same time being able to mediate and control the connection; by maintaining his social relationships through letters, Benjamin could simultaneously preserve his distance and disavow his isolation.

Precisely for this reason, these letters reveal less about Benjamin's inner life than about the external circumstances in which he lived. The reader will find in them few disclosures of Benjamin's thoughts or his feelings, the small revelations for which one typically reads the letters of great writers, like those of James or Gide or Kafka. There are almost no references to his personal life, to his troubled marriage, to his unsuccessful love affairs. And while there are letters that refer to the isolation that Benjamin called "his natural condition," and several others that exude a definite feeling of happiness and contentment, the only letter in which he talks explicitly about his feelings—of being happy, even euphoric—is one that he wrote in the last horrible year of his life, in October 1939, to Gretel Adorno.

Composed while he was held in a French internment camp, the letter describes the camp's "perpetual din" (Benjamin was especially sensitive to noise), the awful rainy weather, his own declining health, the sheer deprivation of his material existence—and an openly erotic dream so "beautiful," he wrote Adorno, "I am unable to resist my desire to tell you about it." Too complicated to summarize, the dream is filled with bizarre images of moss-covered sarcophagi, sailboat-letters, a blood-stained panama hat and a beautiful woman who lifts the sheet on her bed to reveal to Benjamin the "pattern" of his writing. Undoubtedly related to Benjamin's own not very deeply buried death wish, the dream also contains a scene in which a woman "engaged in graphology"—Benjamin himself was a skilled graphologist—tries to read Benjamin's handwriting, and he confesses to his deep fear that "some of my personal characteristics might be revealed."

The last statement might be the most revealing one in the entire book. Yet what the letters do not reveal in the way of "personal characteristics," they make up for by telling us about Benjamin's working life. The focus of the letters is relentlessly trained on his desk (or his bed, where he liked to write). There are detailed lists of his reading, which ranged voraciously from the most arcane corners of medieval German literature and philosophy to every new Simenon mystery; constant notices on the reception of his work and of the work of other writers; repeated updates on his interminable, often fruitless efforts at negotiating the Berlin and Paris literary marketplaces, scurrying after commissions and fees in order to squeeze out a minimal livelihood; and not least importantly, unflagging reports on his bibliomania and latest acquisitions. Benjamin was never too broke to buy something new for his collections. As late as 1934, in a letter from Copenhagen in which he described his "overt side of existence" as "so precarious I won't touch on it unless necessary," Benjamin could also announce with glee that he had discovered some "marvelous ... original tattoo patterns"—yes, tattoo patterns—to expand his collection of "pictorial broadsides."

Scattered among these listings are innumerable reflections that have become the hallmarks of Benjamin criticism, throw-away lines such as his now-famous remark that "every perfect work [of art] is the deathmask of its intuition." And although few letters in the collection contain extended discussions or essays-in-the-making, some of the book's last letters include the important exchange between Adorno and Benjamin over the latter's methodology in the Baudelaire section of the "Arcades project," the never-completed study of Paris in the nineteenth century to which he devoted much of the last thirteen years of his life. Adorno, in his letter to Benjamin (reprinted in the volume), criticized Benjamin's materialist analysis for being insufficiently "mediated," that is, for relating Baudelaire's poetry too directly and simplistically to the social and economic superstructure. "You have done violence to yourself...,' he wrote to Benjamin, "in order to pay a tribute to Marxism that does justice to neither you nor Marxism." Benjamin defended himself by admitting that while "an antagonism" between his personal interests and his Marxist categories existed, "I could not dream of wishing to be relieved of it. The problem posed by this work consists in overcoming this antagonism."

The question of Benjamin's Marxism and of the "violence" that Marxism may



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have perpetrated upon his "personal interests," inevitably raises the subject of Benjamin's relationship with Scholem. As Robert Alter wrote several years ago in these pages (in an essay now reprinted as the first chapter in his luminous little book, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem*), the relationship between Scholem and Benjamin was "surely one of the extraordinary intellectual friendships of the twentieth century." The two first met in 1915, shortly after Benjamin's break with Wyneken, when Scholem was 17 and Benjamin was 23, and they quickly formed what Benjamin called an "intimate affinity," a friendship based on genuine intellectual equality and a sense of mutual loyalty so strong that it survived their radically diverging lives and their sometimes virulent disagreements. Most remarkably of all, the two men conducted their friendship for nearly twenty-five years almost exclusively through the medium of correspondence: Scholem emigrated from Germany to Palestine in 1923, and afterward the two met in person only twice and even then only briefly.

Benjamin and Scholem assiduously saved their letters to each other (which, because they were nearly all handwritten, existed only in single copies). Tragically, nearly all Scholem's letters to Benjamin from before 1932 (except for three important letters which are included in this volume) were destroyed when the Gestapo confiscated Benjamin's apartment and papers. By pure luck, Scholem's letters to Benjamin from 1932-40 were accidentally preserved from destruction; they were discovered in 1960 and published in 1980 in Germany, and translated into English shortly later in a book titled *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1933-1940*, which also includes several letters from Benjamin to Scholem not published in the new volume of Benjamin's letters. Needless to add, these letters were not known to Scholem and Adorno when they first compiled this book of Benjamin's letters.

Even without Scholem's side of the correspondence, however, Benjamin's letters alone allow the reader to reconstruct the development of their relationship and its vicissitudes. From its beginning, the friendship was complementary. Scholem was the great student of Kabbalah, the magisterial philologist who established the modern critical study of Jewish mysticism; and Benjamin was a cabalist of language, an inspired alchemist of culture. To be sure, the two men also could not have been more dissimilar in temperament. Scholem personified single-minded decisiveness. He discovered himself as a Jew when he was 13, and even though he did not decide to devote himself to the study of Kabbalah until his 20s (when he met Benjamin, Scholem was studying mathematics), he seems never in his entire life to have had a moment of serious doubt about anything that was truly important to him. Benjamin, by contrast, was a self-absorbed, socially awkward but authentic genius blessed, among other things, with a propensity for miscalculations that often ended in disaster, and a constitutional incapacity not to pursue to its end every interest and object that attracted his insatiable curiosity.

What drew the two young men together is clear. Both had emerged from the same highly assimilated German-Jewish milieu, both had rebelled against that background at an early age, both were fiercely independent intellectuals of almost manic intensity and with a sense of vocation that was close to a religious calling. Most of all, however, they shared a common commitment to recovering the past that had been obliterated—for Scholem, the Jewish mystical tradition; for Benjamin, the "Ur-history" of modern culture—and a sense of the present as a moment of historical crisis in which the future would be lost if the lost past were not recovered. And for

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both figures, that moment of crisis was also very much bound up with the intellectual and spiritual situation of German Jewry in the first half of this century. Indeed, through their correspondence the two men effectively enacted an accounting of German Judaism and its culture with its widely differing fates which, in some respects, the two may even be said to have embodied in their very own persons. The nature of this accounting is clearest in several exchanges of letters that took place during the late '20s and early '30s.

These letters revolve around two matters of serious disagreement, even strife, between the two friends. The first of these was what Scholem called, in his book on Benjamin, "The Failed Project," namely, his attempts to convince Benjamin to join him in Palestine and to learn Hebrew and thereby to attain "a true confrontation with Judaism." The second was the matter of Benjamin's turn to historical materialism and Scholem's strident disapproval of Benjamin for thereby having betrayed his true metaphysical self, for engaging in what he called "massive self-deception."

As to the first, the failed project, Scholem made tireless efforts to arrange Benjamin's passage to Palestine. He even went so far as to obtain a subsidy for Benjamin to learn Hebrew while he was still in Europe, as well as laying the groundwork for Benjamin to receive a professorship at the then-fledgling Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Benjamin, for his part, repeatedly set dates of departure for Palestine and then postponed them, claiming time after time that one project or another had to be completed before he could leave. As for the subsidy, he accepted the money, but made a very weak effort to study Hebrew. Benjamin's behavior was maddening, and Scholem was outraged by it.

In the case of Benjamin's Marxism, the truth is not so clear. Not least on account of his own personal experience (his brother was an active figure in the German Communist Party), but also for philosophical reasons, Scholem had a particularly virulent view of Marxism. Even so, he was essentially correct in asserting that Benjamin's attempts to fit his thinking into the straightjacket of historical materialism were forced and artificial, and did not do justice to Benjamin's intuitive thinking, which really was theological and mystical in nature.

What Scholem failed to understand was that the Marxist option was, for Benjamin, the only feasible mode of action within his particular political situation, that is, the European political situation; it was the only foundation for an intellectual such as Benjamin to resist fascism, and in this regard he was hardly alone. His turn to historical materialism, even if it was mistaken, was a sincere attempt to come to terms with the terrible moment in which he was living. In fact, Benjamin had fewer illusions about Marxism than Scholem realized. It was always for him "the lesser evil." He never joined the Communist Party, and he insisted upon referring to his historical materialism as "an experiment."

As for his intuitive inclinations, he was also much less deceived than Scholem thought. In an important letter of 1931 to the Swiss editor Max Rychner, Benjamin confessed that "I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely, in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah." To which he added by way of "clarification": "That is, in my experience, the most trite Communist platitude possesses more hierarchies of meaning than does contemporary bourgeois profundity." By this he meant to say that he did not approach historical materialism as a dogma but as a "productive" stance, and that there could even be a bridge between that stance and his theological thinking, "however strained and problematical that bridge may be."

Benjamin was also quite aware of how he appeared to Scholem, about the impression that his project of building a bridge between theology and Marxism must have given. In 1938, after his brief and final meeting with Scholem in Paris, he wrote to a mutual friend, Kitty Marx-Steinschneider, that

> I saw Scholem in Paris shortly before my departure. Our philosophical debate whose time was long due proceeded in good form. If I am not mistaken, it gave him an image of me as something like a man who has made his home in a crocodile's jaw, which he keeps pried open with iron braces.

Yet much more than politics or metaphysics seems to have been at stake in the disagreements between the two friends. There was a critical historical dimension to the personal conflict between them, namely, the situation of German Jewry; and the disagreement between the two over Benjamin's authentic "tendencies" was in fact a kind of re-enactment of the tensions inherent in the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis, the historical claim that there existed a genuine cultural exchange and fusion of perspectives between the two cultures. While Scholem's efforts to bring Benjamin to Palestine and his criticism of his friend's Marxist turn were distinct matters, they can also be seen as two sides of a single coin: Scholem's attempt to "save" Benjamin from what he considered was the essential falsity of the German-Jewish symbiosis.

Even though he was himself partly its product, Scholem's profound conviction of the ultimate moral and intellectual bankruptcy of that symbiosis lay at the heart of his Zionism. Although Benjamin was hardly a typical representative of the German-Jewish symbiosis, his deepest allegiances doubtless pointed in its direction, at the very least to the continuity of European civilization and to his place even as a Jew within the European tradition. Seen from this perspective, Scholem's dual efforts to "save" Benjamin—from Marxism and for Judaism—may be seen as a kind of attempt on his part to rescue Benjamin from that very German-Jewish symbiosis he had personally rejected, to redeem his friend from what he, Scholem, believed to be an inevitable fate of self-destruction.

In this way, Benjamin was Scholem's doppelgänger, a kind of figurative double. He represented the road not taken, and yet the road that he, Scholem, could never fully escape. His own feelings toward the German-Jewish symbiosis were more conflicted than he could acknowledge, and his relationship with Benjamin encapsulated those conflicts. Scholem correctly understood that Benjamin, in espousing Marxism, was rejecting that "full confrontation with Judaism" that Scholem believed was represented by Zionism. The trouble was that Scholem could not reject Benjamin.

For Benjamin, their friendship had a different meaning. Scholem may have embodied the "form" in which he had "come to know living Judaism," as he wrote his friend in Palestine in 1930, but Scholem was not Benjamin's doppelgänger. Benjamin's double was Kafka. More than any other writer, Kafka exercised a deep fascination upon both Benjamin and Scholem. For Scholem, Kafka represented a kind of modern apotheosis of Kabbalah. For Benjamin, Kafka was something more pressing: a representation of his own innermost being, the object of the most intense self-identification.

Beginning in 1931, and in an intense exchange of letters in 1934 surrounding the composition of Benjamin's celebrated essay, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" (whose commission and publication Scholem helped to arrange), and again in 1938 Benjamin and Scholem debated Kafka and the "meaning" of his work. As the



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German scholar Hans Mayer has shown, Benjamin's views on Kafka changed decisively in the years between the 1934 essay and the 1938 letter to Scholem. In both instances, though, Benjamin's approach remained "clandestinely autobiographical." In the first essay, Kafka represented for Benjamin the quintessence of the provisional and incomplete, of an endless process of deferment and postponement that, Mayer argues, Benjamin identified with his own postponement and deferral of the decision to choose between theology and Marxism. By 1938 Benjamin had resolved his indecision in favor of a desire to fuse theology with historical materialism. Now Kafka represented for him the "sickening of tradition," a state of negativity that reflected equally upon the theological enterprise and the vacuous experience of man within modern technological society.

As Benjamin's self-identification with Kafka was undergoing this shift, he and Scholem were conducting an epistolary debate over the nature of revelation and law as significant categories in Kafka's theological imagination. According to Scholem, Kafka still believed in the possibility of revelation, but only as a kind of negative revelation, a revelation of nothingness in which all that could truly be revealed was the experience of revelation. This view of a nondogmatic, even contentless revelation accorded with Scholem's own anarchistic religiosity. For Benjamin, by contrast, the world of Kafka was one in which any kind of meaningful revelation had ceased to exist.

Kafka's "assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer, his students are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ," Benjamin wrote in his essay. In the really remarkable letter to Scholem four years later, Benjamin sharpened and revised this last formulation. After stating dogmatically that Kafka represents 'the sickness of tradition," he continued:

> Wisdom has sometimes been defined as the epic side of truth. Such a definition marks wisdom off as a property of tradition; it is truth in its haggadic consistency. It is this consistency of truth that has been lost. Kafka was far from being the first to face this situation. Many had accommodated themselves to it, clinging to truth or whatever they happened to regard as such and, with a more or less heavy heart, had renounced transmissibility. Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its haggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But that is their misery and their beauty, that they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine, as Haggadah lies


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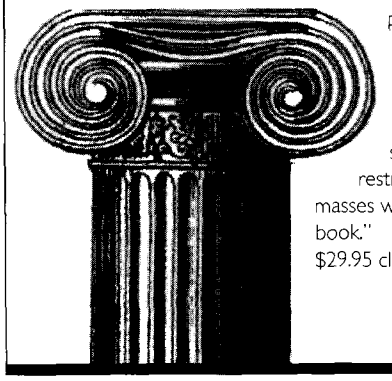

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at the feet of Halakhah. When they have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.

The brilliant idea behind this passage is that Kafka chose to express the disintegration of tradition—the loss of the "consistency of truth"—not by grasping at the shreds of ancient wisdom that might still be saved of that truth, but by choosing to reproduce the forms of truth, its literary styles and mannerisms—the genre of the parable, most notably—even though those forms were divested of their contents, the "epic side of truth."

And the form in which Benjamin expressed what he saw in Kafka is itself striking—specifically his choice of the classical Jewish terms Halakhah and Haggadah, the Hebrew names for rabbinic law and rabbinic lore. Many writers on Kafka have tried to get a hold on Kafka's Jewishness; they have invoked his concerns with the absent divinity, with the categories of Justice and Law, and with the process of interpretation and its endless ambiguities. Yet none of these attempts have been able to stipulate what is inherently Jewish about any of these concerns in Kafka. Benjamin tried something entirely different. Instead of seeking to identify the Jewish elements in Kafka, Benjamin situated Kafka's writing within the Jewish tradition, and this he did by employing the language of the tradition, the terms Halakhah and Haggadah, which he used not for affectation but for precision. And he was uncannily on the mark. What is most inspired about Benjamin's use of the Jewish terms is the transformation that he worked upon them. He cloaked the sacred Hebrew words in the image of the beast (a lion? a bear? a tiger?) lying in supposed submission at the foot of the mountain of traditional doctrine, but with its paw raised threateningly against it. If, by using the terms Halakhah and Haggadah, Benjamin placed Kafka within an identifiable Jewish tradition, then through the image of the beast he simultaneously evoked the threatened, virtually wounded state of that tradition and Kafka's adversary, even subversive, relationship to it.

Benjamin's description of Kafka may be an apt depiction of his own relation to tradition, and to Jewish tradition in particular. Much has been written recently about Benjamin's Jewishness. Along with Scholem, Benjamin has been invoked by some as a significant source for a postmodern Jewish theology (whatever that is) or a secularized Judaism. Attempts have been made to trace his messianic and redemptive view of criticism to the Kabbalistic lore that he may have learned from Scholem (though it now seems more likely that he derived it from the late romantic writers on language and mysticism he so loved, from Hamann and Humboldt and Molitor). Others have sought to argue that it was Benjamin who influenced Scholem, that his mystical view of language may have shaped Scholem's influential conceptualization of Kabbalistic linguistic theory. And some writers have sought to show that Benjamin's own critical writing, with its unpredictable analogical reasoning and brilliant leaps of interpretive imagination, represents a kind of inherently Jewish writing, a type of modernist midrash.

In an important book called *L'Ange de l'Histoire* (which has not yet appeared in English), Stéphane Mosès recently made an important contribution to our understanding of Benjamin's Jewishness, by placing his philosophy of history alongside that of Scholem and of Franz Rosenzweig, the great German-Jewish philosopher and Benjamin's slightly older contemporary. Mosès suggests that Benjamin's anti-historicist philosophy of history, with its emphasis on remembrance as a way of actualizing the past in the present, has deep affinities with traditional Jewish views of the historical past and its commemoration. Elsewhere Mosès has also proposed that Benjamin's connection with Jewish tradition may have come about not only through Scholem's influence but, perhaps even more decisively, through that of Rosenzweig, whose work we know (partly from the letters) Benjamin read and cited.

Reading Mosès, one sees that the elements in Judaism that attracted Benjamin were precisely those he perceived as subversive, as offering an alternative to the positivist categories of historiography which, with its desire to treat the past solely as a "cultural heritage," he found so reprehensible. And yet it remains hard to identify Benjamin's self-consciously secularized theology as being specifically Jewish. He certainly saw himself as a Jew, and he explicitly acknowledged powerful affinities between some of his ideas and those of Judaism, but Benjamin's theology was, in the end, truly secular and profane; and *that* was the meaning of his materialist turn. The Kafka passage is about the sickness of tradition generally, and not only about the sickness of Jewish tradition specifically, even if it defines that general sickness in those particular terms. Even when it borrowed from Judaism, Benjamin's theology was more than Jewish.

This suggests a solution to the great Benjamin riddle. Benjamin's many-sidedness was not a confusion. It was his spiritual temperament, which prevented him, as a matter of principle from choosing any one thing. Whether this inability was a result of his "inner inhibitions," as Scholem remarked, or whether it was the very essence of his genius, his contradictions must not be dismissed as his personal failings. They were the symptoms of an ailing age, the conflicting allegiances of the historical moment, which is why his contradictions continue to cast their aura—one of Benjamin's favorite terms—long after the consistencies of many of his contemporaries have faded from view. Like the ruins of the ancient past that he often evoked, Benjamin's contradictions survive in his writings as enduring monuments to his singularity. •

# *Parallel Universes*

**BY MICHAEL HEYWARD**

## The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith by Peter Carey

**(Knopf, 422 pp., $24)**

Peter Carey knows that the novelist's greatest freedom is the freedom to invent. He is an artificer, a fabulist whose work, with its gestures toward fantasy and science fiction, has always had the spectacular credibility and the irrevocable logic of dreams. When his short stories, with their hapless characters trapped in eerie, claustrophobic landscapes, began to appear in Australia in the 1970s, one thing was obvious: anything could happen in them. A man could become a truck. Aliens might invade and introduce a genetic lottery. People found their hands turning blue. Carey's imagery was vivid, surreal, scary. Australian fiction was never like this.

As Carey grew more confident, the short story became insufficient for his



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purposes. In the longer stories and in the novels that followed—*Bliss* (1981), *Illywhacker* (1985), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), *The Tax Inspector* (1991)—he learned how to stitch one incident into another to create the sensation of an unstoppable plot. He never abandoned the clean, lean prose of the early work. It was if he suspected that the trappings of art would interfere with the drive to communicate his fictional universe. This clarity and raciness, combined with the obvious ambition in Carey's work, also made him stand out in an antipodean context in which the longing for work that can be taken seriously has often produced the effect of brocade: writing that is ornate, heavy, self-consciously literary. By the end of the 1980s, once readers had access to *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, it was clear that one of the obvious points of reference for Carey's work was the Victorian novel, with its supposition of an enthralled, page-turning reader. Both *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda* had intricate, gargantuan plots that gave readers a continent enlarged under the glass of Carey's imagination. They were received in Australia with the kind of excitement that Patrick White's novels generated in the 1950s.

From the outset, Carey's work introduced readers to a gallery of freaks, losers and fast-talking rogues. The idea of the misfit who wins our confidence and makes us believe in his humanity runs through much of his writing. *Illywhacker* begins with this dazzling confession:

> My name is Herbert Badgery. I am a hundred and thirty-nine years old and something of a celebrity. They come and look at me and wonder how I do it. There are weeks when I wonder the same, whole stretches of terrible time. It is hard to believe you can feel so bad and still not die. I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar. I say that early to set things straight.

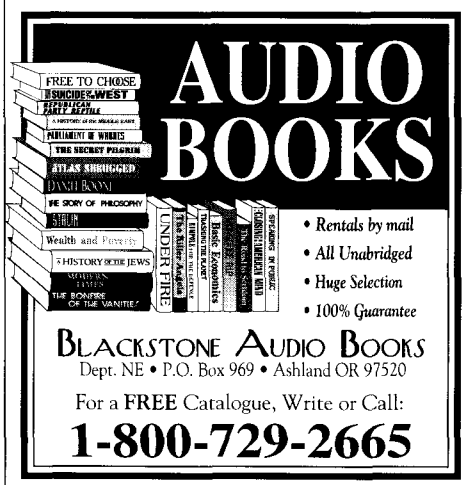
Carey prefaced *Illywhacker* with Mark Twain's wonderful observation, made in 1897 after his tour of the colonies, that Australian history "is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer" and does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises and adventures, incongruities, contradictions and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened." You could not find a better gloss for the way Carey set about constructing an imaginary Australia that is indisputably strange and strangely plausible. If Carey is a magical realist, it is in part because he has been obsessed by questions of nation and history, by the need for the writer to believe that his work can define how these issues are imagined and discussed. "I think the writer has a responsibility to the truth," Carey once said, "not to shy away from the world as it is."

Carey always knew his nationality was an advantage, precisely because it gave him the opportunity to make indelible images in a country still coming to grips with the antiquity of its indigenous culture, and the novelty of its transplanted European culture. Perhaps the appropriate point of comparison for the development of Australian writing in the past fifty years is with mid-nineteenth-century America, with Melville, Whitman and later Twain himself as they collectively helped to build a national literature. "With sheer will and determination and enthusiasm you can make something that's going to affect the whole history of your country," Carey once said. "We're really so privileged to be able to be working with Australian literature at this time." He fulfilled these ambitions with *Oscar and Lucinda*, a love story that concludes with the indelible image of a glass cathedral—"a prism, a cube, a steeple of light sliding into the green shadows"—floating down the Bellinger River in an 1860s Australia. This was indeed a beautiful lie.

Carey's new book is also obsessed by the idea of national and cultural identity. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* quite explicitly devotes itself to the construction of an imaginary world that hauntingly resembles the actual world. The contours of this fascinating allegory are more reminiscent of Carey's early short fables than any of the intervening work. Here again we enter an intimidating high-tech world, this one defined by vids and zines and simis and voice patches. (The latter allow their wearers to talk underwater.) Once more we find ourselves in the heart of a menacing, labyrinthine environment, in which the lives of the characters are governed by shadowy powers stronger than they are, and which seems to operate according to systems to which only a few have the key. In this book Carey locates these powers directly in the sphere of international espionage. The novel is a picaresque fable that ultimately assumes the shape of a political thriller, though its overriding preoccupation is with cultural power. This is a world in which arguments about culture can break up relationships and incite murder.

Carey has pushed his imaginative prowess to the limit. He has not simply intuited the possibilities of national history or character, he has invented an entire geography, and two new species of English patois. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is a tale of two nations: the Republic of Efica, a small provincial country, a cluster of eighteen islands "between the tropic of Capricorn and the thirtieth parallel"; and Voorstand, a powerful hub of cultural and economic activity that throws its long shadow over almost everything that happens in Efica, even though it's thousands of miles away, with part of its territory lying within the Arctic Circle.

Efica is a former penal colony, settled several centuries previously by the French and the English. The Efican Calendar dates from the foundation of the country, and the action of the book begins in the year 371EC. Efican English is deeply influenced by its French roots, and it has a lively vernacular. A "bride" is a pint of beer. "Mollo mollo" tells its hearer to relax. The wet season is called the "Moosone." A "turnboy," we learn, was "originally a chauffeur, but later a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mechanic." To understand Efica, we are told, you need to read books such as *Efica: From Penal Colony to Welfare State,* published by Nez Noir University Press in 343EC. One of Efica's writers, a certain Jacqueline Bardwell, grew famous by writing a book called *A Long Way from Anywhere.*

Carey's Eficans are self-deprecatory, ironic, open, practical people. They are "laconic, belligerent, self-doubting." "No one can even tell me what an Efican national identity might be," someone says in exasperated despair.

> We're northern hemisphere people who have been abandoned in the south. All we know is what we're not. We're not like those snobbish French or those barbaric English. We don't think rats have souls like the Voorstanders. But what are we? We're just sort of "here." We're a flea circus.

Carey's Eficans are faced with the inherent provincial dilemma of how to reconcile themselves to the fact that the metropolis knows next to nothing about how they live, may not even know where their country is. The great wide world about which they dream is not wide enough to include them. "My name is Tristan Smith," the novel begins. "I was born in Chemin Rouge in Efica—which is to say as much to you, I bet, as if I declared I was from the moon." With its huge ultramarine skies and its semitropical air, Efica might be a Caribbean island, though for Australian readers it is more precisely the kind of place Australia might be if it were imagined as a Caribbean island. You will not find the word Australia mentioned once in the book, but for Australians that is all the evidence they need. *Tristan Smith* is an obsessive parable of national identity.

Voorstand—"2,000 miles from north to south, 865 lakes, 10,000 towns, ninety-three major cities"—is a more dangerous and more contradictory place by far. It is both effortlessly self-confident and driven by a nostalgia for a time when it was a better, simpler country. "You hold the red passport with the phases of the moon embossed in gold," Tristan tells the nameless Voorstandish reader to whom the book is addressed. "You stand with your hand over your heart when the Great Song is played, you daily watch new images of yourself in the vids and zines." Like Efica, Voorstand is a country of the new world but its colonizers, and the shapers of its English, were Dutch.

Thus a skyscraper is a "wolkegrabber," explained in Tristan Smith's glossary as "a cloud-grabber." A rollerblader is called a "wheel-squirrel." Voorstanders perfume themselves with "odeklonje." Carey's intuition of the dialectics of Efica and Voorstand is one the novel's prime imaginative feats. The words his characters use become a key indicator of cultural difference. In context their speech is never unintelligible, but provides the fictional equivalent to that sensation of strangeness we all have when we hear foreigners speaking our language but using words we never would. We know what they mean but would say it differently. At the back of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* you will find glossaries for Efican and Voorstand English, but as you read on you will find yourself flipping to these to confirm what you have already understood.

If Voorstand seems very like the United States, then Saarlim, the great metropolis that dominates Voorstandish life, is a version of New York, with its lavish private wealth and public decrepitude. "Saarlim City was littered with abandoned papers, cans, bottles, cars, mattresses, stuffed furniture." But Saarlim, as one of its inhabitants describes it, is also the "Arts and Leisure capital of the world." Its stories are told "in every corner" of Efica, and Eficans dream about it the way children do Narnia. Tristan remarks that

> it is hard for some Ootlanders to accept that they are not attuned to the soul of Saarlim. They may never have visited Voorstand but they know the names of the steegs, the kanals, the parks, the bars, the Domes.... But they do not live in Saarlim and therefore there is much that they do not understand.

Voorstand's cultural dominance of Efica is the natural outcome of its political influence in the smaller country. The two nations are allies but Voorstand exploits Efica for defense purposes, interferes in its elections and murders its citizens when the status quo is threatened. "That is the paradox," Tristan grumbles when he meets a man in Saarlim who has never heard of his homeland. "We are important enough for you to bring down our government, but you have never heard of us. You could see this gjent had no damn idea where Efica was."

This highly suggestive relationship between the two nations is focused on the outlandish figure of Tristan Smith himself. He was born in 371EC; by the novel's end, he is in his early 20s. He is raised by his mother Felicity, a Voorstander who has adopted Efica as her own and identifies with its creative ambitions. "We have a whole damn country to invent," she tells another actor in the small, left-wing, avant-garde theater company she runs. Tristan's father, Bill Millefleur, is an Efican who later migrates to Voorstand. Tristan himself is the ugly duckling of this international union,

> a gruesome little thing. He is small, not small like a baby, smaller, like one of those wrinkled furless dogs they show on television talk shows. His hair is fair, straight, queerly thick. His eyes are pale, a quartz-bright white. They bulge intensely in his face. He has a baby's nose—but in the lower part of his severely triangular face there is, it seems, not sufficient skin. His face pulls at itself. He has not lips, but a gap in the skin that sometimes shows his toothless gums.

This deformed mouse-like boy grows into a man "three foot six inches tall, bandy-legged, club-footed, rag-faced," but his consciousness and his intelligence form the moral heart of the book. When the adult Tristan eventually makes the long, hazardous and tiring journey to Voorstand himself, he undergoes an astonishing transformation that turns Carey's theme of cultural domination into something grotesque, compelling and finally irresistible. The wild (Efican?) ironies of the novel's concluding events on the streets of Saarlim and, in the velvety confines of a plush "trothaus" (apartment) there, derive directly from the possibilities created by Tristan's deformities. Carey makes the most of having his innocent Efican abroad. Along the way Tristan is robbed, intimidated, and ultimately put in extreme danger of his life. He might be so ugly as to disgust casual bystanders in the street, but there is something indestructible about him, too, perhaps because he is guileless, generous and good.

Before all this can happen, however, Tristan becomes a not-very important activist against the alliance between Efica and Voorstand. The whole political mood of the novel is reminiscent of Australia in the early- to mid-1970s, the period of the Vietnam War and the sacking of Gough Whitlam as prime minister, when anti-American sentiment reached fever-pitch in some quarters of Australian society. (Voorstand goes to war against Burma, with Efican support.) Many people of Carey's generation absorbed American culture with their mother's milk, but they were also suspicious about the extent of its influence. Australia, some thought, had become the "Coca Colony." When the Whitlam government, which had pulled Australian troops out of Vietnam and sought to formulate an independent foreign policy, was sacked in 1975, some detected the hand of the CIA, up to its old tricks. These sorts of echoes help explain why this book seems to reach back to the atmosphere of Carey's early work. In part it fictionalizes the politica



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ontext in which he began to publish. (For the record, Tristan Smith dates his utobiography with the year 426EC, vhich puts him in his mid-50s at the ime of writing. Carey himself is in his arly 50s.)

The dominant cultural form in both Voorstand and its satellite Efica is the Sirkus, Voorstand's "thrilling, spectacular, addictive, but also heartless" brand of mass entertainment, sometimes seen live and sometimes on vid, as Tristan would say. Its impact in Efica, we are to understand, is comparable to the influence of Hollywood and American television in Australia today. But the Sirkus has its own traditions and rituals that are inseparable from the mainstream values of Voorstand itself, where nice have souls, and it is supposedly taboo to kill any animal. Behind the Sirkus is an elaborate Franciscan ideal, introduced to Voorstand by those "brave Dutch heretics," the "Settlers Free," who were intent on a "Sirkus Sonder Gevangene"—a circus without "prisoners," that is, one without animals.

The idea has now been corrupted at the same time as the long-dead Settlers Free, with their folksy values, shining eyes and simple lives, have been elevated into the misty realms of the Great Historical Past, when Voorstand was a kinder, gentler place. It matters not that "grey furry Bruder Mouse with his iridescent blue coat, his white silk scarf, his cane" is now "nothing more than a logo-type, the symbol for an imperialist, mercantile culture." The global power of the Sirkus increases regardless, even though, as Tristan notes, "in its celebration of the individual, in its inequitable rewards for luck, in its invitation to have the audience be complicitous in the not infrequent death of performers, it ran counter to everything we Eficans held so dear."

Voorstandish readers of this book will detect in Carey's account of that nation's cultural and religious pieties a compelling parody of the uses to which Christian fundamentalism can be put, and a cool insight into the way that nostalgia for a sanitized past can intensify the confusion of the present. "We were decent people then," laments Mrs. Gram, a denizen of Saarlim City. "Bruder Mouse was not a clown. We knew him when we saw him.... We did not have all these codicils and revisions to the old laws. We ate beans and rice and raagbol pudding. We did not rape and murder. We did not thieve. We were better then."

The Mouse, the Duck and the Dog, Sirkus stars all of them, fill the heads of Carey's characters. Donald, Mickey and Goofy were never so palpable as the appalling creatures Tristan encounters on his voyage to Saarlim. If all the world is not a stage now but a themepark, we really are destined to become the residents of Voorstand and Efica. Could there be anything worse, Carey seems to be asking, than a situation in which practically everyone espoused the values of mass culture, especially in societies that did not create them? Tristan might know what's wrong with the Sirkus, and he might even, by seeming to be a part of it, have his final revenge on the Sirkus; but the Sirkus will continue to expand, like the universe itself. Driving this book is the savage irony of the provincial who has learned that the metropolis is merely a larger and more powerful province than his own. "All art is provincial," Felicity declares, but her son Tristan, berating his reader from Voorstand, provides the rider that perhaps inspired Peter Carey to write the novel in the first place. "You have no idea of your effect on those of us who live outside the penumbra of your lives."

MICHAEL HEYWARD is the author of *The Ern Malley Affair* (Faber and Faber).

# *Family Elements*

**BY LISBET KOERNER**

## Marie Curie: A Life by Susan Quinn

**(Simon & Schuster, 496 pp., $30)**

On May 20, 1921, President Harding welcomed to the White House "a noble creature, a devoted wife and loving mother who, aside from her crushing toil, has fulfilled all the duties of womanhood." He then hung around the neck of his visitor, the Polish-born chemist Marie Sklodowska Curie (1867-1934), a small gold key symbolizing a hugely expensive gift from her American female admirers: one gram of radium, the radioactive element that Marie Curie, together with her husband, had first discovered and isolated. By 1921 the 54-year-old woman had already become what she remains today: the world's most famous woman scientist.

Curie was the first woman to receive a Nobel Prize in science. In 1903 she won the prize in physics, with Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel, for their discovery of radioactivity and two new radioactive elements, radium and polonium. And she remains the only woman to have received two Nobel Prizes; her second she received alone, in 1911 and in chemistry, for her continued work on radium and polonium. She trained her daughter Irène Curie so successfully that she, too, received a Nobel Prize, in 1935 and in physics, with her husband Frédéric Joliot-Curie, for experimentally producing artificial radioactivity. After her husband's accidental death in 1906, Marie Curie inherited his position. Thus, at the age of 39, mother of a 9-year-old and a 2-year-old, she became the first woman professor at the University of Sorbonne. She received many prestigious awards, scholarships and grants, and was elected to a host of learned societies, even if the French Academy of Science blackballed her and Harvard held out in its refusal to grant her an honorary degree, suspecting that her husband alone was responsible for their work.

Curie's scientific achievement remains important, if not theoretically earth-shattering. In 1895 the German scientist W. C. Röntgen generated (in effect by bombarding fluorescent spots in his glass tubes with streams of electrons) a mysterious "x-ray." It penetrated even flesh and blood to mark on a photographic plate the bones of his wife's hand. In 1896 alone, x-rays (which we now know to be electromagnetic waves roughly 1,000 times shorter than visible light) were the subject of 1,044 scientific papers and forty-nine books. In that same year a French scientist, Henri Becquerel, discovered that the element uranium had an hitherto unknown property: it spontaneously emitted yet another and unknown type of ray. By 1898 Pierre and his brother had devised an instrument, the pizo-electric quartz electrometer, that could be used to measure quantitatively the degree of this radiation.

With this tool, Marie Curie, who had given birth to her first daughter the year before, set out to search for new sources of radioactivity. Investigating two uranium compounds, pitchblende and chalcite, she deduced correctly that unknown and more potent radioactive elements inhabited these compounds. She



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then decided to purify these compounds, naming the residual elements "radium" and "polonium." Laboriously, and using as her solvents hydrochloric acids, sulphuric acids, and bisodium carbonates, she leached, washed, boiled and evaporated slurries of pitchblende. Having eventually reduced her original tonne of material into a few micrograms, she produced a near-pure radium chloride. By 1902 she was able to determine, within one half of one percent, the atomic weight of radium.

But what was the nature of radium's odd property of radiation? According to the law of conservation of energy, the newly discovered radioactive elements must have absorbed energy in order to now emit these rays. But where had that energy come from? Was it a phosphorescence, a past exposure to an energy source? Or was it—as the Curies believed at least until 1903—a fluorescence, an ongoing exposure to an energy source? And if so, what was that energy source? We now know that naturally occurring radioactivity was, apart from the heat of the earth's core, the first nonsolar form of energy discovered on earth. And in a weird sense, it *is* a phosphorescence of sorts: some 20 billion years ago, in the Big Bang, the energy now emitted as particulate and electromagnetic radiation once had indeed been stored within the atoms of these elements, but in the form of mass.

Courtesy Eve Curie Labouisse

MARIE CURIE WITH HER DAUGHTERS, EVE AND IRÈNE, 1908

Around 1900, however, the Big Bang was unknown. Einstein had not yet related energy to mass. Not all physicists agreed even that the existence of the atom was securely proven. And some scientists who were atomists still understood the atom to be indivisible, which is what its name actually means. But then, in 1897, J.J. Thompson demonstrated the physical existence of the electron, and even calculated its mass. And beginning in 1898, Ernest Rutherford, establishing firmly the existence of the atom and—most importantly—some of its constituent parts, could show that radioactivity divided into alpha rays (helium atoms each missing two electrons), beta rays (high-speed electrons) and gamma rays (penetrating electromagnetic waves). Together with Frederick Soddy, Rutherford also showed that these rays were emitted as a by-product from the atomic nucleus (the existence of which he famously demonstrated in 1911), as radioactive elements degenerated into increasingly more stable species of atoms. It was now possible to draw up decay tables for radioactive isotopes, and it was Rutherford and his collaborators who established that radium is a daughter of the uranium-238 alpha disintegration series.

The key theoretical achievements in the new science of radioactivity thus belonged to Rutherford and his group, but Marie Curie's genius for the quantification of data (such as degrees of radiation and atomic weight of elements) played a significant role. And yet her contributions to pure physics do not explain her immense fame. In 1921 this scientist was greeted at New York Harbor by three orchestras and many thousands of people. And, typically for the period, she was frequently "immortalized" in verse. At a select gathering in her honor at the Paris Opéra—graced even by the presence of the President of the Republic—Sarah Bernhardt recited an emotional "Ode to Mme. Curie," likening her to "the sister of Prometheus." Marie Curie herself later "regret[ted] a little that I threw away the [fan] letters.... There were sonnets and poems on radium." And radium in turn was pitched, not least by Curie herself, as a miracle drug.

During World War I, she organized for ambulatory x-ray machines to tour trench hospitals. She also trained her teenage daughter in x-ray diagnostics. And she took great pride in "curietherapy," as radiation treatment was called in France. And in this respect the popular imagination meshed her science and her gender. Radium was billed as a discovery peculiarly appropriate to a woman, engendered by what her daughter characterized as "a marvelous feminine curiosity." *The New York Times*, in its 1921 celebration of the "motherly looking scientist," ever had a front-page header promise that "MME. CURIE PLANS TO END ALL CANCERS." And at a reception in her honor at the Waldorf Astoria that same year, the keynote speaker noted that Marie Curie was "not welcome here as a scientist, but as a woman who has done more to comfort human beings than any one who has made important discoveries in this generation." For radium was understood especially as a cure for women's cancers, such as malignant tumors of the cervix, uterus and breast. The gram of radium that a group of American women, most of them graduates of the Seven Sisters, donated to Curie in 1921 was thus primarily intended for the treatment of gynecological carcinomas.

But even as Curie proclaimed radioactivity a medical "magic bullet," her own fingers were hardening, reddening and stiffening, her eyes were clouding over with cataracts and—invisibly and slowly—her bone marrow was being destroyed. In 1934, at the age of 67, she died from radiation-induced pernicious anemia. The surprise is really that she lived as long as she did, and also that, after a late miscarriage in 1903, she could give birth to a healthy, normal child in 1906. Her husband was already invalided by



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radiation illness in 1906; her daughter Irène died from exposure-linked leukemia; and her son-in-law succumbed to liver failure related to radium toxicity. In the Curie laboratories, young assistants were regularly carried off in the advanced stages of fatal illness; some died within weeks, others lingered for years, pitiful cripples wracked by pain. Even today some of the Curies' laboratory notebooks, which are housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, are so contaminated that the researcher must sign a waiver before examining them. In early self-experiments Marie and Pierre Curie had deliberately burned themselves with radium compounds, observing with interest such "lively effects" as grayish wounds, scaling skin and morbidly sensitive limbs. Yet even when, in her 50s, Marie Curie was turning blind and deaf, she would only admit that "perhaps radium has something to do with these troubles, but it cannot be affirmed with certainty."

In her day Curie was celebrated, then, as a woman scientist, or, more exactly, as a mother scientist. How she managed to be both a mother and a scientist, and how this dual achievement became the basis of a public cult, would be a promising theme for a biography. Unfortunately, it is not the focus of Susan Quinn's new life of Marie Curie. More traditionally, Quinn prefers to dissociate her subject from her surroundings. She structures her pleasant and slightly flat book more conventionally around an unmasking of Curie, for the purpose of exposing her subject's true, sexualized, Freudian self. The book becomes quite detailed when it describes Curie's affair in 1910 with her husband's former student, the French physicist Paul Langevin. At the time, the affair was publicly condemned because of the injury to his wife. It would be equally a scandal today, of course, but as a form of sexual harassment; the injured party would now be Langevin himself, recast as a younger and less institutionally secure colleague.

Quinn's book does not offer new or thought-provoking perspectives on Curie's life, let alone the wider history of women and science. The first important life of Marie Curie was written by her daughter Eve Curie in 1937, and other lives have since appeared. Like earlier biographies of Curie—the last two in English were published in 1986 and 1989—this most recent one does not greatly pretend to theoretical ingenuity or scholarly feats. Still, Quinn's biography is interesting to read. It allows us to reflect on that central question of Curie's life: How was it, in President Harding's words, that the "zeal, ambition and answering purpose of a lofty career could not bar you


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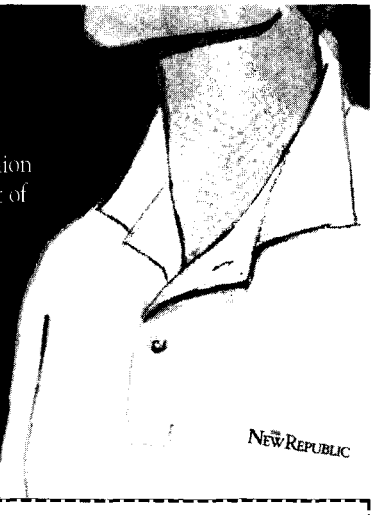


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from splendidly doing all the plain but worthy tasks which fall to every woman's lot"? And this is not only a question about the past. Curie was not only a scientific pioneer, she was also a social pioneer.

The story of Marie Curie's life should matter to all men and women in two-career families, who watch with dazed amazement the leisure of their childless friends and are left with an intimation of mortality. These dour and sleep-deprived parents are moralists who come to believe that the pastimes of leisure are vanities, and that they have been miraculously given, in the small persons of their children, a grace so profound that they could never, in the earlier and easier lives, have imagined it. And yet they also yearn for what Marie Curie called a "lofty career." They are intrigued by the ability of a woman to combine a career with her "plain but worthy tasks." As she herself characterized this central dilemma: "It is my whole life that is at stake."

Marie Curie, in short, was what we would call a working parent. For the non-scientists among us, it is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of her life. Of course, she was not typical. She was brilliant, and she came from a family at once politically alienated and socially esteemed, and married into another such family, and so she and her kin were apt to examine critically the conventions of her day—such as the notion that women are best left unschooled. Still, reading her biography we can recognize her predicament. Indeed, like all working parents Curie obviously benefited from what we might name, in her honor, the Curie Compensation Correlation: as the hours available for research shrink, with the advent of children, the efficient output per hour of work grows.

She herself stemmed from impoverished and passionately patriotic Polish gentry. Born Marie Sklodowska in 1867 in Warsaw, she was brought up by her father, himself a teacher, to consider education a crucial mark of civilization (compared always to the barbarism of the Russians occupying her country) and her only means of support. To put an older sister through medical school she worked for five years as a governess, and her Brontë-esque first romance ended as her landlord-employers forbade their son to marry her. Her husband's family, the Curies, doctors and scientists all, belonged to the Alsatian Protestant bourgeoisie. Marie's husband, like her father-in-law, passionately identified with the communards of 1848, and later they were committed Dreyfusards. These were progressive families, profoundly committed to the education of women.

Pierre Curie never helped Marie raise their children or run the house, but in all other ways he supported her career. He scrupulously gave her credit for her scientific achievements, even warning the Nobel committee that he would accept the prize only if it was also awarded to his wife. And the couple successfully negotiated with the University of Geneva and the Sorbonne for joint positions; you might say that they invented the "two-body problem" that now characterizes many hiring decisions in American academe. Marie Curie married a man who was, at least as she interpreted it, positively American in outlook. For, as she noted on her first American tour in 1921, on this blessed new continent she could discern no opposition "between feministic aspirations and masculine opposition." And she added, with the wonder typical of some Old World women, that in the United States men even "approve of these aspirations and encourage them."

Marie Curie came of age with our own modern world. Paris around 1900 was fast acquiring indoor plumbing, telephones, streetlights, mass transit systems, elevators. The postal system was so effective as to function almost as a kind of e-mail. And intimations of now-forgotten techno-futures abounded: electrically powered sidewalks, zeppelins, pneumatic mail systems. There were even hopes to harness paranormal forces (the investigation of which consumed Pierre Curie's last years). And of course there was radium itself, which was widely understood as a "source of perpetual motion." Quinn wonderfully captures this bustling world when she quotes the infamous best-seller of 1895, *Degeneration*, in which Max Nordau envisioned something very much like our own professional present, when we "read a dozen square yards of newspaper daily ... [are] constantly called to [the] telephone ... think simultaneously of five continents of the earth ... live half [our] time in a railroad carriage or in a flying machine."

And yet, compared to that brave new world, life in 1900 was still dreamily calm. By the summer of 1898, for example, when the Curies knew themselves to have arrived at a key point of their investigation of the radioactive properties of uranium, they left their laboratory for their summer holidays, and they did not return until November. (They securely identified their new element six weeks later.) The couple's slogan, "one must always work," thus cannot be read literally, or as we would read it. In the Curies' world, its force was owed to the nineteenth-century ideal of genteel life as involving no labor.

And just as Marie Curie's scientific work was interlaced with *les grandes vacances*, so, too, a great calm informed her care of her children. However sympathetic they are to their subject, Marie's modern biographers at times cannot restrain themselves from characterizing her care of her children as bordering on neglect, or on abuse. The fair-minded

## *The Suitors of My Grandmother's Youth*

At dusk on sabbath afternoons the slow-
voiced suitors appeared, with awkward hatbrims in
their field-burred hands. They tipped themselves
on the very brinks of the Sunday chairs.
Their napes were fiery under their collar-starch.
The knees of their blue serge suits looked rubbed and smooth.

Fireflies would be blinking then, across the lawns.
Under the hedge, like small and drowsy stars
witnessed through mist, they glittered and went out.
And everywhere, lilac would spire in June
its chaste and promissory fragrance. Her
sisters broke off sprays and clasped them
with half-ironic passion to their throats.
The boys were mute, traded long-suffering,
conspiratorial looks. On slow, speechless
strolls their beaux would hand to them
desperate fistfuls of wild violets,
and all their futures still appeared
benign with promise, all their loves
still hovered before the transactions of the blood.

**Eric Ormsby**



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Quinn notes, however, that she was eally a conscientious and imaginative mother (although, as her daughter vould remember, she was "ever away rom home"). With her friends she even tarted a cooperative primary school aught exclusively by professors of the orbonne. Later she brought her daughers to her laboratories, creating a scienific family economy of sorts.

Marie Curie was our predecessor in this way, too: her tenderness toward her children increased with ier participation in the workforce. True, he farmed out her children to servants nd for month-long banishments to the ountryside. But she is much closer to us han is, say, her near-contemporary gatha Christie, who abandoned her todler to a nurse for a pleasure trip around he world, and on returning a year later as mildly peeved at the child for not recognizing her, and reported the entire ncident very cheerfully in her autobiography. Compare that Edwardian notion f motherhood to the present disdain for amilies who bring in weekend shifts of abysitters. Curie could also, in a way now argely lost to us, draw on extended famly networks. Her sister often stayed for nonths, and her father-in-law lived permanently with the family. As she blandly oted in her autobiography, he was her hildren's great love and playmate. Today rofessional families have run out of this riceless commodity: someone who both oves and has time for the children. Most rannies now pursue their own careers, r they live complacently in leisure on heir own.

An aging woman looking back on her fe, Marie Curie remembered that "I ave been frequently questioned, espeially by women, how I could reconcile amily life with a scientific career. Well, it as not been easy." Compounding her ifficulties, she not only faced what she ill termed the "serious problem [of] ow to take care of our little Irène and of ur home without giving up my scientific ork." She also worked in an era when, o matter how brilliant her achievenents, because of her sex, she was always able to be billed an "average plodder," quote the *World Today* of 1911. Or ne elicited some subtler yet equally trouling responses, such as the one given by ne head of Yale University physics labotories, who on meeting the double obel laureate in 1921 pronounced him-lf "quite pleasantly surprised to find at she was quite keen about scientific atters."

ISBET KOERNER is an assistant professor the Department of the History of Sciice at Harvard University.

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For the last five decades, the world has been convinced, mostly because of unrelenting Arab propaganda, that the conflict between Israel and the "Palestinians" is the root cause of the constant turmoil in the Middle East and that Israel should make "concessions" to the Arabs. But is that the *real* reason for the turmoil and for the violence? Or is there another much deeper, more fundamental reason behind it?

## What are the facts?

■ We Americans are reluctant to criticize or even to discuss the religions of others. We consider it a very personal matter. but the profound hatred of the Moslem Arab world against the West, especially against the United States (the"Great Satan") and Israel (the "Little Satan") can only be explained by trying to comprehend the psychology and the principal religious tenets of Islam. Islam is a world-wide religion, but it originated in Arabia and it survives in Arabia in its purest form unaffected by any outside influences. The policies of the Arab countries are totally dominated by Islam. Islam believes itself to be in possession of the holy truth. In the name of that truth, any act of violence is permitted, sanctioned and encouraged. It is perhaps only with that understanding that the acts of savagery, the suicide bombers in Israel, the bombing of the World Trade Center and other acts of murderous fanaticism all over the world can be explained.

■ For the first six centuries after the Moslems spilled forth from the Arabian peninsula, they conquered much of the then known world. The Arab Moslems did in their ascendancy indeed give rise to a substantial civilization. But then, beginning with their expulsion from Spain, a long decline set in that lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. That decline was the more bitter, the more frustrating, because it was inflicted by the hated and despised "infidels". It was something that had to be remedied by whatever means. Injured pride had to be salved; the enemies who caused this intolerable humiliation and this painful injury had to be destroyed.

■ The 20th century brought national independence to the Arab states. Two other fundamental events occurred: 1) The discovery of the world's largest oil deposits under the Arabian peninsula, and 2) The creation, in 1948 of the state of Israel, which ever since its birth has been the concentrated focus of the hatred and venom of all Moslem Arabs, a hatred that unites them, that even surpasses their hatreds against each other, and that has launched them into five disastrous wars against Israel. Even the rape of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq was explained as being a step towards the "liberation of Palestine", a claim so bizarre, so patently absurd that it can only be comprehended and given credence by a mind obsessed with the ideology of Arab Islam.

■ The obsession of the Moslem Arabs with Israel is totally irrational. To have Israel, an advanced highly civilized Western outpost, as an independent country in the middle of the Arab-Moslem world is utterly intolerable to them. That is the reason that, making allowance for the very cold peace with Egypt and the recently concluded peace with Jordan, the 21 Arab states, among them the richest countries in the world, with a combined population of more than 200 million and with a land area greater than that of the U.S., have since the beginning of the century concentrated obsessive ferocity by military, economic, ideological, political, diplomatic, and any other means to destroy the tiny Jewish community of Palestine, and its successor, the Jewish state of Israel—only 4 million people, in a country just one-half the size of San Bernardino County in California.

The recent events in the United States, Argentina and England have sobered many who had believed the Israel-Palestinian conflict to be the cause for the unrest in the Middle East. The fact is that war is endemic in the Arab world and that the Moslem Arabs have been waging war against each other and against their non-Arab neighbors for centuries. But, as much as the Moslem Arabs hate each other, most of them are united in their greater hatred against the "infidel Jews" and their tiny country, and they have built vast war machines for the ultimate "jihad" to chase the Jews into the sea. The insincere focus on the Palestinian plight is designed to divert attention from the many domestic problems and inter-Arab conflicts, and to direct the Moslem Arab frustration against Israel, the "infidel Western outsider". The suggestion that Israel divest itself from its historic heartland, the 2,362 sq. mi, "West Bank" and from the Golan Heights would be a step toward its strategic suicide. The real cause of the never-ending turmoil in the Middle East is the unremitting desire of still most of the Arab Moslem states to destroy Israel, their inability to come to terms with its very existence. That hatred and that intolerance are fueled by Arab-Moslem fanaticism and intransigence and unwillingness to accept diversity in the region. Only when that will be overcome can peace and tranquility finally come to the Middle East.

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*Facts and Logic about the Middle East*

*P.O. Box 590359 ■ San Francisco,CA 94159*

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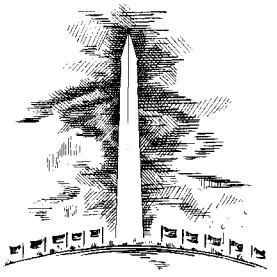
# WASHINGTON DIARIST

## Shameless

I'VE BEEN TO HOLLYWOOD A FEW times, the first more than a decade ago. I was 19, in the middle of my first, improvident fling with the United States and under the impression, as many Europeans are, that the Universal Studios tour was a critical part of understanding America. At the time, this was a forgivable error. Before I actually arrived here, the movies and television *were* America. I remember my first sensation on the streets of New York: not that I was finally in the United States, but that I was finally in the *movies*, because the movies were the only place where these accents were familiar. As the American language twanged about my ears, I felt as if I had slipped into celluloid (which is why, perhaps, over the years, my accent has slipped into it as well). It's a feeling other Brits never get over, whether they pore over Hollywood in their cultural studies curricula in Leeds, or slurp warm beer in the expatriate recesses of Westwood.

HAPPILY, I THINK, I DID EVENTUally get over it. Slowly, the actual experience of America eclipsed my arch preconceptions about it. Sure, there's plenty of American schlock I still get a kick from, as native-born Americans may never do. (I feel as though I owe half my adolescence to a displaced appreciation of "Starsky and Hutch.") But I'm not under the illusion that this schlock is somehow exclusive to America, or particularly American. Go to Britain, and there's far worse everywhere: spiritual deadness, architectural dross, journalistic tripe, televised crassness. It's largely to distract themselves from such realities, I think, that Europeans love to condescend to Hollywood's America. They like their America formulaic: it's easier to deal with. Jean Baudrillard and Stuart Hall, to name a couple, project their own exhausted home-cultures onto one of the few places in the West that truly isn't culturally exhausted, finding the end of meaning where there is simply an end of taste. The Europeans' lack of faith synchronizes beautifully, of course, with Hollywood's lack of principle. And the circle between Euro-cynicism and American capitalism is complete now that many of Hollywood's products are designed to make money finally in the European market—the "Baywatch" principle. Eventually, with any luck, they may cut out the middleman altogether and leave the tasteful, middle-class American public alone.

BUT WHAT IS TRULY DEPRESSING is how so much of the American elite has begun to absorb this European outlook. They have begun to talk of today's Hollywood moguls, who have produced so little of any lasting cultural value, in tones once reserved for the people's elected representatives, or real artists, or even public intellectuals. They glamorize these CEOs because they understand their market power, and because they have lost faith in any principle other than market power. They look up to these people because they have lost the self-confidence to look down. Increasingly lacking any deep sense of where they're from or what they're doing, the chattering classes have simply capitulated to Hollywood values and Hollywood rationales. The publicists and flacks and agents and models and directors and actors are treated as if they actually matter beyond the quality of the product they help create (which is almost always awful). They are awarded serious profiles in serious magazines; they are placed on the cover of *Time*; they are invited to speak at Harvard; serious newspapers open bureaus to cover them; *Vanity Fair*, which in the 1980s pioneered journalism as celebrity-fellatio, produces a slick, Oscar-timed tome in which it is virtually impossible to find anything that isn't entertainment-industry public relations. And *The New Yorker*. . . .



THERE IS ONE CURRENCY IN THIS world, and it is celebrity. Or rather, because the people who peddle celebrity are too sophisticated to actually believe in it (and too jaded to believe in anything else), the currency is "celebrity." It is kept at an ironic distance, but it is still the only thing that matters. Politics is irrelevant, which is why conservatives are silly to diagnose Hollywood as a leftist cabal. The people who run Hollywood are probably lazily liberal, but their politics are primarily of the office or the conspiracy variety. Their movies are largely devoid of politics, because politics introduces a principle which mitigates against the principle of celebrity. So things are no longer right or wrong; they are hot or not hot. Things are no longer true or false; they have buzz or they do not. Products are not valued for what they are, but for the celebrity they create. And the celebrity they create is as ephemeral as the buzz that sustains i and the money that lubricates it.

NONE OF THIS WOULD MATTE much if it weren't so contagious. Bu as the power centers that can resist Holl wood have weakened—the political an intellectual worlds—so the cult of celel rity, of buzz, of money, has become eve more powerful. In some ways, Washin ton's capitulation to spin over substanc is simply an adoption of a Hollywoo mode. (Reagan was the master of it; Cli ton is its sad progeny.) Political ideas ar thrown into a soup of fast-changin buzzes, where pundits become would-b stars and aides becom would-be publicists. Un versities compete for ac demic stars, who becom as much like celebritie as thinkers, their work le vital than their mark value. Lawyers court th press and fame, turnin trials into miniserie Journalism adopts a st dio system, with the meg studio, Condé Nast, buying up talen turning writers and editors into celel rities and focusing primarily on the u and downs, deals and undeals, of wha ever trend the publicists and advertise demand. In all this, form takes effortle priority over content, until much of wh we think and say and write becomes eeri resonant of one of those movies who ending is always being tested. A lot this has always gone on, of course. B it seems to me to have reached a fev pitch lately, and to have emanated p marily from the loins of Los Angeles.

CAN IT CHANGE? OF COURSE I can. The sheer vacuity of this culture- its moral, artistic and intellectual emp ness—means it can't be sustained inde nitely. Like some endless, banal Osca show, it's just too boring and too shallo for an audience as smart and as curio as this one to watch for long. There ar of course, some structural impediment How can *Time* magazine find a cent apart from Hollywood, when it's inext cable from Warner Brothers? But t public demand for something better w eventually, I think, win out. You alrea see signs of it: the flickers of spirit argument in the public sphere, of ge uine innovation on network televisio of a crisper populism in politics. May the Hollywoodization of everything just a passing by-product of boomer las tude. Here's hoping. And when th dreaded "Barbara Walters Special" per up next Monday evening, you, too, c do your part. Turn it off.

**ANDREW SULLIV**



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# Where We Stand

By Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers

# Beyond Magic Bullets

Educators are always looking for a magic bullet—a hot, new idea that will take care of all the problems with our education system. That accounts for the love affair with vouchers and market schools, EAI-type ventures into privatization and, most recently, charter schools. And we can be sure that next year it will be something else. Like people who are always eager to try the latest miracle diet, they think that the next fix will be the one that finally turns things around.

But these fads don't get to the heart of the educational enterprise. If we want to change our schools for the better, we have to change what goes on in the classroom between teachers and students. There is nothing revolutionary about this idea: It is common sense. It is also extremely difficult to do. Leon Lederman's recent description of Teachers Academy for Math and Science (TAMS), a privately funded organization providing in-service training to elementary school teachers in Chicago, shows what is involved (*The Sciences*, January-February 1995).

This is not flashy stuff. It is basic common sense. It is also tough and demanding.

Lederman, a Nobel laureate in physics and director emeritus of the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory who now works with TAMS, believes that good early training in science and math opens some important doors for children:

> ...science and mathematics, taught in the right way, engage children, resonate with their own natural curiosity and open a door to the joy of learning .... A positive introduction to the study of science and mathematics serves as a foundation for an interest in those topics throughout a person's lifetime. And as for the relevance of the curriculum, the engines that drive the changes in contemporary society are science and science-based technology.

But none of this will happen—indeed kids are likely to be turned off math and science—if they don't have teachers who know these disciplines *and* how to guide children in learning them. And the sad truth is that many elementary school teachers do not have the background to do a good job. This is no reflection on their hard work or devotion. They are victims of poor preparation and a system that frustrates their efforts to learn and change while they are on the job instead of supporting these efforts. In Japan, as Lederman points out, teachers spend nearly half their time working together to improve the lessons they teach and the way they teach them, and there is ample money to support professional development activities. In the U.S., however, teachers seldom have a chance to consult with their peers about their teaching, and little or no money is spent on helping them upgrade their skills and knowledge; Lederman says the figure is usually less than 1 percent in Chicago. The problem of poor instruction in math and science is especially acute in an urban school system where expectations tend to be low—and, tragically, where youngsters have the most to gain from excellent instruction.

But, Lederman says, TAMS shows how, given the time and resources, teachers can learn the skills they need—and are elated by the process:

> In the past four years we have introduced seventy-two schools and some 3,200 teachers to our program—and some of them have been with us for as many as three years. On average, they have received roughly 120 hours of instruction in science, 140 hours in mathematics and more than 140 hours of additional close teaching supervision. That leaves only...420 schools and 14,000 teachers to go.
>
> Changing culture is never easy. That so much time and effort (and money) are needed should be no surprise to the funding agencies, but it is. We estimate that to sustain the efforts we have begun in Chicago will probably take an investment of between $3,000 and $4,000 a year per teacher for perhaps three to four years....The total is equivalent to the tuition for one year at a mid-priced university. Yet one of the curious and inexplicable frustrations of our work has been the difficulty of getting the money to sustain it.
>
> Does the program work? Yes! Teachers love it. And when it is well managed, it creates an intense, joyous learning process. Such interventions also lead to a greatly energized teaching corps, in which the new teaching style spreads to other subjects and brings with it technology that can fruitfully enhance the teacher's effectiveness.

This is not flashy stuff. It is basic common sense. It is also tough, demanding and expensive, and it takes time—which may explain why educators often ignore this kind of thing in favor of quick-fix schemes. Lederman does not believe that schools can, by themselves, mount programs to bring about necessary changes in teaching and learning, and he may be right. But there are signs that the public is becoming skeptical of reforms that substitute flash and dazzle for attention to basic issues, and I believe and hope that reforms like the one he describes will increasingly find powerful public support.

Mr. Shanker's comments appear in this ad under the auspices of the American Federation of Teachers. Reader correspondence is invited. Address your letters to Mr. Shanker at the AFT, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20001. © 1995 by Albert Shanker.

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